

# **WAITING FOR THE REVOLUTION**

The British far left  
from 1956

EDITED BY  
EVAN SMITH AND MATTHEW WORLEY



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## Introduction

### The continuing importance of the history of the British far left

*Evan Smith and Matthew Worley*

While putting together our second edited volume dedicated to the history of the British far left, we have witnessed nearly two years of Jeremy Corbyn's stint as leader of the Labour Party (in fact, the final touches to this volume are being added on 9 June 2017, the day after Labour's electoral surge under Corbyn). This has, in turn, brought a renewed interest in the far left's history.

Corbyn's victory in July 2015 had been on the back of a wave of enthusiasm among different sections of the Labour Party membership – trade unionists, young people, those who flirted with the Greens and other minor parties, working-class members, and, of course, refugees from the British far left. Many on the far left had written off the Labour Party as unreformable in recent years, but Corbyn's entry into the leadership contest after the 2015 election made a number of the Party's leftist critics reassess their analysis of Labour. The election of Corbyn as Labour leader seemed to many to overturn the assumed position of the far left since the advent of New Labour in the 1990s. From Militant Labour (later the Socialist Party of England and Wales) to the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), it was presumed that the Labour Party was unsalvageable, a bourgeois party that had abandoned the working class. Entrism was left to the rump of Militant, while the other groups began a long line of alternative electoral vehicles to Labour – Socialist Alliance, Respect, No2EU, TUSC, Left List (for example). Admittedly, some groups, such as the Communist Party of Britain, still called for a Labour vote at general elections, but asked people to metaphorically hold their nose while doing so. But the initial period after Corbyn's victory seemed to suggest that there was political life left in Labour, awoken from its slumber by the thousands of veteran activists from the social movements of the 2000s that Corbyn had been involved in, primarily Stop the War, the Campaign for

Nuclear Disarmament, Unite Against Fascism and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign.

However, as 2016 proved, trying to reform the outlook and membership base of Labour (which has been the intention of many of those supporting Corbyn) while trying to maintain the emphasis on electoralism (which has been the focus of the Party since 1945 at least) brought the Party to near schism. Looking at the long history of the relationship between the British far left and the Labour Party, it seemed that the lessons of the 1960s (when the International Marxist Group (IMG) and International Socialists (IS) became entities in their own right) or the 1990s (when Militant Labour had its ‘open turn’) might have to be learnt all over again. Entrism has its limits and it is possibly far better for the far left to be social forces outside the Labour Party putting pressure from without than to be marginalised while attempting to apply pressure from within. Since the Labour Party refused to affiliate with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the 1920s, the far left has had to negotiate how much to work with (or within) Labour and how much to differentiate and present an alternative.

The Communist Party of Great Britain had sought affiliation with the Labour Party several times during the inter-war period, but after its last attempt failed in 1945–46, the CPGB devised another way to influence Labour and bring forward the future possibility of a Labour–Communist alliance. This influence would come through the structures of the trade union bureaucracy. Most other groups on the far left looked to seek influence in the trade unions at rank-and-file level, but wrote off the higher echelons of the trade unions as reformist and too conservative. Nevertheless, this strategy of working through the trade unions formed the basis for the CPGB’s post-war programme, *The British Road to Socialism*. As John Callaghan has noted, almost all the elements of the CPGB’s plan to gain influence inside the Labour Party through the trade unions came together in the period between 1973 and 1983 (between the defeat of the Heath government and Labour’s ‘radical’ 1983 manifesto),<sup>1</sup> but as we now know, there were little tangible gains from this strategy. The victory of the trade unions over Edward Heath only resulted in a crisis-ridden Labour government beholden to the International Monetary Fund and Labour were roundly defeated in the 1983 election by Margaret Thatcher after the Party’s leftwards shift caused a section of the right to break away to form the Social Democratic Party.

The loss of the 1983 election is routinely blamed on ‘entrists’ pushing the Labour Party to the left, resulting in a manifesto that alienated the political centre. Roy Hattersley is attributed as saying the Party’s ‘Trotskyists, one-subject campaigners, Marxists who had never read Marx, Maoists, pathological dissidents ... played a major part in keeping the Conservatives in power for almost twenty years.’<sup>2</sup> Although the actual reasons for Labour’s

disastrous showing at this election are far more complex, the shadow of 1983 has loomed large over the party since Corbyn's leadership victory.<sup>3</sup> Since becoming Labour leader, many predicted that Corbyn would repeat the mistakes of Labour under Michael Foot – giving too much leeway to the far left and thus encouraging a split with the centre-right. The far left was portrayed by many commentators as a nebulous force set to derail Labour's ability to present a credible opposition to the Conservatives and one of the main reasons that Labour would lose any upcoming general election. While the spectre of various Trotskyists and communists inside the Labour Party had been raised, it also vastly overestimated the influence that the far left has within the Labour Party nowadays. In the end, when Theresa May called a snap election in April 2017, she expected to make significant gains for the Conservatives at the expense of Corbyn's Labour Party. As we write, Labour has defied expectations, campaigning on the back of an explicitly socialist manifesto, and gained the highest Labour vote since 1997, resulting in a hung parliament.

It all looked so different not a few short months ago. In his 2016 book on the Corbyn 'revolution', Richard Seymour suggested that the Labour Party 'may simply be untenable in its current form'.<sup>4</sup> The gap between the electoral desires of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the grassroots call for reforms by a large section of the membership, not to mention the shifting voting base of Labour, seemed unsurmountable – and a resolution to suit all involved unrealistic. Journalist and economist Paul Mason then suggested that the Labour Party should become a social movement rather than simply an electoral political party. However, the post-war history of the British far left highlights the difficulties in creating a social movement around an organised political party rather than a single issue organisation. As Phil Burton-Cartledge showed in our last volume, *Against the Grain*, the success of the far left has come when it has spearheaded a broad-based social movement,<sup>5</sup> such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Anti-Nazi League or the Stop the War movement, rather than when it has tried to consolidate and centralise its membership into a particular party. The history of the far left in Britain has shown that when different parties have attempted to transform momentum from a broad social movement into concrete party membership, this has not been easily translated. An understanding of the history of how the far left has operated and functioned in Britain since the 1950s is therefore important to understand the limits of a radical agenda within a reformist framework. It is hoped that this book, as well as the previous volume, will help provide readers with this understanding.

Our previous volume, *Against the Grain*, was published in 2014 and looked to start a conversation among scholars and activists about the history of

the British far left. Apart from the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), many of the other far-left groups had had their history ignored and their role in wider British politics, particularly in the various social movements of the last forty years, overlooked. *Against the Grain* attempted to overcome this and invited a number of established and emerging scholars to write about various aspects of the far left's history. This volume included chapters on the IS/SWP and Militant/SP, dissidence in the CPGB, Trotskyism and the Labour Party, Third Worldism, anti-racism and anti-fascism, women's liberation, gay rights, anarchism and the emergence of the British New Left.

We acknowledged at the time that the book could not be a comprehensive history of the British far left and would serve as a starting point for further investigation. Reviews of the first volume, while favourable, have pointed to several areas that we had not included and deserved attention, including the trade union movement, entrism and Militant, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Ireland, and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. With this in mind, we have been looking to put together this second volume ever since the first volume was published in October 2014.

In this time, the scholarship has widened, with a number of new books and studies published since 2014 (and with several of these authored by contributors to this volume). This has included research on race and the women's liberation movement, racism and the English working class, the Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners group, punk, youth culture and the far left, the British peace movement and communism, the far left and the 2010 election, the decline of the Communist Party, and the politics of Red Action (among others). Much of this scholarship is by a generation of emerging academics, bringing new historical insights and techniques to the study of the far left traditionally dominated by labour history scholars and those from political science. As this volume shows, the study of the history of the far left in Britain brings together scholars from a variety of disciplines, using a number of historical practices and theories.

As well as a widening scholarship, the study of the British far left has also been lifted by the new sources that have been made available to researchers, particularly those that have been put online. The US-based Marxist Internet Archive (MIA) has greatly expanded the texts available, with transcriptions or scans of many Marxist publications from across the world, but primarily the US and the UK. The MIA's two sub-sites, the Encyclopaedia of Trotskyism Online and the Encyclopaedia of Anti-Revisionism Online, have provided scans of the Socialist Labour League, the Workers Revolutionary Party, the Spartacist League and the various Maoist parties in Britain, while providing the texts of the entire first run of *International Socialism* journal. To rival the vast material available on the Marxist Internet Archive, a group of ex-IMG

members at the blog *Red Mole Rising* have dedicated themselves to scanning the publications, as well as the internal papers, of the IMG and its successor, Socialist Action. This includes an entire run of *Black Dwarf*, *Red Weekly* and *Socialist Challenge*. The Amiel and Melburn Trust, connected to the remnants of the CPGB, has published scans of *Marxism Today* from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, alongside the entire run of the first two New Left journals, *The New Reasoner* and *The Universities and Left Review*. The successor to the moniker of the CPGB, the former group that published *The Leninist* in the 1980s, has now put the entire back catalogue of this factional journal online. Another fringe organisation (that was featured in our previous volume) was Red Action, whose entire journal run (also titled *Red Action*) has been uploaded by former members. Furthermore, the Irish Left Archive, run by people from the Cedar Lounge Revolution blog, has collected material from a broad range of British and Irish left groups relating to Ireland and the conflict in Northern Ireland. The continuing digitisation of these materials by former activists possibly represents a democratising of the historical memory of these groups and the movements and struggles they were part of, allowing people across the globe access to materials that may have only been available to those with the means to visit the necessary archives if traditionally housed.

Several of the chapters in this collection are indebted to the materials that have been digitised and uploaded by these online archives. We believe that much more than the first collection, this volume covers a wide variety of the far-left groups, the movements that they were involved in and the issues that they engaged with. First is Jodi Burkett's chapter on the far left and the student movement in England during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Burkett points out, the student movement in England was not as homogenous as scholars, the far left and the press have traditionally believed and although intertwined with the far left, had different goals and strategies. Some groups, such as the IMG and IS, saw great potential in the student movement, but there was also scepticism, from the CPGB, Militant and sections of the IS that students were not necessarily part of the working class and had ambiguous class politics. However a problem that faced the left from the 1960s onwards was declining political interest from the working class, especially the institutions of the Labour Party and the trade unions, and that those attracted to the left increasingly came from the student movement and other sections of society.

Often critiqued as 'substitutionism' or 'vanguardism', a number of left-wing theorists believed that the working class in the advanced capitalist West could not be the revolutionary force that Marxists had previously thought and looked to these other groups and social forces. One of the endgames of this

kind of thinking was the belief that political violence against the state was needed, particularly as the capitalist system used violence against the left in the West, and against the Third World in general, such as in Vietnam. This led to the establishment of the Weather Underground in the United States, the Red Army Faction in West Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy and the Japanese Red Army in Japan. The second chapter also looks at a similar organisation in Britain, the Angry Brigade, who undertook a number of attacks on British installations between 1969 and 1972. J. D. Taylor situates the Angry Brigade within the wider anarchist/libertarian left movement that existed in London during this period, and the crossovers that the Brigade also had with a number of protest movements of the time, including the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Irish Republican movement, the anti-Franco movement and the campaign against the Industrial Relations Act. Taylor suggests that historians of the far left in Britain have often overlooked the Angry Brigade and despite their short-lived existence, their presence fed into a wider radical movement that was emerging after 1968 in the UK, as well as increasing repression by the state against the forces of the left.

At the other end of the spectrum, the [Chapter 3](#) looks at the revival of the pacifist Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the 1980s. Although originally a political movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Jacquelyn Arnold shows that CND was revived by the re-heating of the Cold War in the early 1980s under Ronald Reagan and the controversial introduction of the Trident system by the incoming Thatcher government. In a similar scenario with the present, CND's resurrection coincided with a left-wing surge in the Labour Party under a pacifist leader, Michael Foot. The symbiosis between CND, the far left and the Labour Party saw the regeneration of the peace movement in Britain and radicalised a new generation of activists in the early 1980s. However, after the Labour Party took up the position of unilateral disarmament as a manifesto promise in the lead up to the 1983 election, the subsequent electoral defeat halted the effectiveness of CND and highlighted the limits for the left in working within the Labour Party.

Another social movement that gained momentum in the 1980s was the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM). Started by exiled South African communists and members of the CPGB in the late 1950s, the AAM gained traction in the early 1960s with the Rivonia Trial, but was overlooked by many activists over the next decade. In [Chapter 4](#) Gavin Brown shows that after the Soweto Uprising in 1976 and the death of Steven Biko in 1977, the British far left became increasingly involved in campaigns against apartheid South Africa, but greatly differed on strategies, analysis of the situation in Southern Africa and expressions of solidarity. By the 1980s, most groups supported the African National Congress, the release of all political prisoners



and some form of sanctions against the state, but beyond this, the groups varied widely in their approach.

The next few chapters shift focus from wider social movements to the way in which the far left interacted with the trade unions and the organised labour movement. First, in [Chapter 4](#), Jack Saunders looks at how the International Socialists built a network of rank-and-file trade unionists inside the motor industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s and how this challenged the dominance of the Communist Party as the left-wing alternative to the Labour Party in the unions. Saunders shows how the motor industry became a breeding ground for ‘Factory Trotskyism’, with the Socialist Labour League and Militant also making headway at several plants, and concentrates on the limited impact that the IS had within the Chrysler factory in Stoke Aldemoor, Coventry.

The following chapter by Sheryl Bernadette Buckley explores the role that the CPGB played within the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s. The NUM was one of the most significant trade unions in the post-war period and also one of the most politically influential, as evidenced by the wave of strikes between 1972 and 1974 that brought down the Heath government. Buckley suggests that while the CPGB was heavily integrated into the structures of the NUM, at the times when it was most militant (during the early 1970s and in the mid-1980s), the Party was unable to influence the direction of the union, which could be seen as a microcosm of the broader problems of the Communist Party’s industrial programme.

Also looking at the miners’ strike that took place in 1984–85, in [Chapter 7](#) Diarmaid Kelliher examines how other sections of the left and different social movements supported the striking miners. In particular, Kelliher unpicks the networks of solidarity created between various activist groups in London and the striking miners in Yorkshire and Wales. These networks, forged by anarchists, feminists, gays and lesbians, and black women, demonstrated the diversity of those who sought to confront the Thatcher government and potential allies for future activism, bridging the gap between the new social movements and the traditional labour movement.

While Kelliher looks at networks of solidarity built in the 1980s between striking miners in Yorkshire and activists in London, Daisy Payling’s chapter focuses on how the city of Sheffield, particularly through the Sheffield City Council, became a site of resistance against Thatcherism in the 1980s. This was partly due to the proximity of the striking miners in South Yorkshire to the city, where local and national campaigns of support converged, but Payling reveals that other ‘local socialist’ initiatives around housing and public services were developed in the city.

Payling shows that regional identity was important to those in Sheffield in combating Thatcherism, describing themselves as the ‘Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire’. The next chapters extend this, looking at the far left and regional politics across the different countries of the United Kingdom. In [Chapter 9](#) Ewan Gibbs and Rory Scothorne explore how a ‘left-wing’ Scottish nationalism developed between the 1950s and the 1980s, and how the Marxist left and strong militant trade unionism helped Scotland shift from a Tory to a Labour heartland. Gibbs and Scothorne argue that even though Labour’s electoral performance has recently declined, the ‘myth’ of a progressive Scottish nationalism has been long fostered north of the border.

As Daryl Leeworthy demonstrates in [Chapter 10](#), a similar left-nationalism emerged in Wales in the post-war period, but also shows that this left-nationalism was not monolithic and fractured along several fault-lines. In particular, it was divided between the Labour Party and a relatively strong Communist Party, but also divided between Welsh and English speakers, and between North Wales and South Wales. For Leeworthy, Labour was slow to engage with Welsh nationalism and when it finally did, Labour’s influence in the region was tempered by other factors, such as the defeat of the miners’ strike and the rise of Plaid Cymru as a ‘progressive’ alternative.

Daniel Finn shifts our focus in [Chapter 11](#) to the relationship between the British far left and the conflict in Northern Ireland. Beginning with the Connolly Association and its links to the CPGB, Finn outlines how the left tried to engage with the burgeoning civil rights movement in Northern Ireland in the mid-to-late 1960s, but when the conflict broke out in 1969–70, the various groups of the British left were deeply divided on how to relate to the violence of the Republican movement. Finn shows that some Trotskyist groups, such as the IMG, critically supported the Provisional IRA while other groups avoided the issue. This allowed People’s Democracy and then Sinn Féin to present themselves, at different times, as local left-wing alternatives, although the dominant force in Republican politics has remained the nationalist wing of Sinn Féin.

The final chapters of this volume investigate three far-left organisations that were not featured in the first volume. [Chapter 12](#) by Michael Fitzpatrick is an activist’s account of the history of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), one of the most controversial outfits of the British left. Emerging in the mid-to-late 1970s from a Third Worldist splinter group from the IS, the RCP attempted to disassociate itself from the rest of the left and in the 1980s took several highly contentious positions on issues such as free speech, AIDS, Ireland and environmentalism (defended in a highly sectarian manner). The RCP is probably more well known for its shift towards libertarianism in the 1990s and its dissolution in 1996, with most of the Party’s leading

figures establishing Spiked Online in the 2000s. We include this chapter as few people, either scholars or activists, have written about this group, despite the infamy of Spiked Online among most left-wing and progressive people. Fitzpatrick's chapter ends with the dissolution of the RCP in the late 1990s and does not venture into its successors, *Living Marxism* and *Spiked*, but the chapter helps us to understand the political trajectory that the RCP was taking that led to these initiatives. Like Mark Hayes' chapter on Red Action in the previous volume, we believe that these insider accounts need to be recorded and hope that it will encourage other scholars and activists to conduct research into these groups on the fringes of the political spectrum.

Next and with much relevance to contemporary events in the Labour Party under Corbyn, Christopher Massey charts the rise of the Militant Tendency as an entrism force within the Labour Party, from its days as the tiny Revolutionary Socialist League to the heights of its influence in the mid-1980s and then to the 'open turn' with the establishment of Militant Labour (later the Socialist Party of England and Wales). The history of Militant inside the Labour Party and their expulsion by the Kinnock leadership is important to ongoing debates on how the far left should interact with Labour and the limits of entrism (as well as the opportunities it presents).

This can be contrasted with the formation of the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), which broke away from the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1988 and retained control of the newspaper, the *Morning Star*. In this volume's final chapter, Lawrence Parker demonstrates that those involved in the creation of the CPB strongly believed in an independent Communist Party, but committed to the Labour–Communist alliance as described in *The British Road to Socialism*. The focus of the CPB was to maintain the traditional links to the trade union movement and a broadly pro-Soviet outlook, which they believed had been abandoned by the CPGB leadership in the 1980s. However, in a post-Cold War world, the CPB now competed with the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party to attract those who would have been originally drawn to the CPGB and this proved difficult for the Communist Party, with the *Morning Star* arguably 'saving' the CPB from oblivion.

As with *Against the Grain*, the aim of this volume is to showcase some of the emerging research on the topic of the British far left and how it fits into wider historical scholarship in and of Britain. Alongside recent debates about British political and labour history,<sup>6</sup> we hope this volume demonstrates that we cannot ignore the far left; and while some might disregard such groups, parties and tendencies as obscure or on the fringes of the discipline, we argue that their histories reveal wider insights into the functions of the Labour Party, the role that social movements have played in recent history,

and the potential impact of far-left ideas beyond the small groups parodied repeatedly in mediocre *Monty Python*-esque routines over the last thirty-five years.

### Notes

- 1 J. Callaghan, 'The Plan to Capture the British Labour Party and its Paradoxical Results, 1947–91', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40/4 (2005), p. 707.
- 2 Cited in, M. Steel, *Reasons to be Cheerful: From Punk to New Labour* (London: Scribner, 2001), p. 116.
- 3 For example, see: P. Dorey and A. Denham, '“The Longest Suicide Vote in History”: The Labour Party Leadership Election of 2015', *British Politics* (2016), doi:10.1057/s41293-016-0001-0.
- 4 R. Seymour, *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 12.
- 5 P. Burton-Cartledge, 'Marching Separately, Seldom Together: The Political History of Two Principal Trends in British Trotskyism, 1945–2009', in E. Smith and M. Worley (eds), *Against the Grain: The British Far Left from 1956* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), pp. 80–97.
- 6 See: S. Fielding, 'Looking for the “New Political History”', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42/3 (2007), pp. 515–24; P. Readman, 'The State of Twentieth-Century British Political History', *Journal of Policy History*, 21/3 (2009), pp. 219–38; J. McIlroy, 'Waving or Drowning? British Labor History in Troubled Waters', *Labor History*, 53/1 (2012), pp. 91–119.

## Revolutionary vanguard or agent provocateur

Students and the far left on English university  
campuses, c.1970–90

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Students are left wing and student politics are dominated by the far left. That is a widely popular view of students within the press and popular discourse.<sup>1</sup> This view dominates current debates and has been at the forefront of popular understandings for nearly fifty years. This chapter will explore these popular understandings in the period after 1968 when the National Union of Students (NUS) in the UK was at its most active. This chapter counters existing arguments that student activism reached its pinnacle in 1968 showing instead that the 1970s and 1980s were the decades of most widespread and revolutionary student activities in England. This chapter argues that the far left had a presence on most university and college campuses across the UK and within the NUS, but did not define student politics or student movement activity.

Some of the key terms within this study are problematic as they refer to different groups, or different amalgamations of groups, at different times. For ease and consistency the term ‘far left’ in this chapter refers to all political groups to the left of the Labour Party. In the main, in this period and milieu, this means the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), the International Socialists who became the Socialist Workers Party in 1977 (IS/SWP), and the International Marxist Group (IMG). Other, smaller, groups do make brief appearances within student politics in this period, but these three are the largest and most influential groups.

Despite the growth in higher and further education in this period and the increasing importance of the NUS there are, as yet, no published accounts of the NUS, student politics or students themselves in this period. Rectifying this gap is, in itself, one goal of this chapter. However, this chapter aims to do significantly more. In focusing on the interactions of national and local political formations this chapter adds to a nascent discussion of the impact

of local networks on national debates and discussions.<sup>2</sup> For those interested in political manoeuvrings, the ways in which political cultures are created and maintained, and how linguistic choices inform and create political parameters, a focus on student politics in this period is particularly fruitful. This chapter also adds to the increasing historical interest in the 1970s and 1980s. Amid dominant narratives of decline, crisis and disintegration about the 1970s and neoconservative triumphalism of the 1980s this chapter suggests a new way of looking at the politics of the era through the lens of highly politically committed young people.<sup>3</sup> Many of those who were actively involved in their local students' unions or the NUS in this period went on to political careers. This chapter will, therefore, shed light on the political training of a significant minority of British political leaders. Many of those involved in the activities of local and national students' unions in this period also went on to work in the third sector. The activities and politics of these organisations are an important addition to the literature on the professionalisation of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in this period.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter will first explore the existing literature about students, student activism and the far left in Britain in this period. The depiction of student politics and the link between students and the far left within the British mainstream press will then be discussed before moving on to explore the attitudes within the three main far-left organisations, previously identified, to students and the student movement. Finally, this chapter will examine the politics of the student movement, focusing on the leadership of the NUS and debates within and around students' unions showing that the far left was an important influence on student politics but did not determine the policies of the NUS or local students' unions.

### **Students and the far left in literature and the press**

Nineteen sixty-eight was a key year for student politics and activism around the world.<sup>5</sup> Until recently, the actions and activities of British students have been overlooked or side-lined for being 'less radical' or insufficiently revolutionary.<sup>6</sup> In the last few years this view has begun to change as scholars have taken a closer look at the actions and activities of students in the UK.<sup>7</sup> These studies have shown that a considerable degree of activity was taking place on university campuses across England (and in Scotland and Wales) during 1968 which questioned many of the basic tenets of university administration and British society.

While significant events did take place on university campuses in 1968, this year has become mythologised, both by contemporaries and subsequent scholars, which has a detrimental impact on our understanding of events and has worked to obscure our vision of the period both before and after

1968, pulling it out of context. The mythologisation of 1968 has also served to distance activism from the more mundane and regular experiences of the majority of students. It bolsters the view that student activism was the work of a small minority, was not supported by most students, and was separate from activism taking place in working-class trade unions, international solidarity groups (such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement), and ethnic or minority activism.<sup>8</sup> Some contemporaries argued that student activism was the result of 'agent provocateurs' rather than organically emerging from students themselves.<sup>9</sup> Who exactly these 'agent provocateurs' were, however, was never clear and ranged from 'foreign students' (usually American as seen by university officials and politicians), to the CIA (from the perspective of some students) and, perhaps most often named, members of far-left groups, particularly the IS/SWP and IMG. Caroline Hoefflerle claims that 'by the early seventies, the International Marxist Group and International Socialists had replaced the New Left as the most powerful student activist groups at Oxford' and that one of their key goals was to get students 'to think more like the working class'.<sup>10</sup> The IMG were said to be working strenuously to 'actively recruit students'.<sup>11</sup>

There is scant literature about student activism and student politics during the 1970s and 1980s. This lack of attention to students themselves has been lamented from a variety of disciplinary orientations.<sup>12</sup> One recent work which focuses on students themselves is that of Georgina Brewis, who puts student activism within its historical context going back to the late nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Other notable contributions to addressing the gap within the literature on British students' unions is the work of Mike Day, who has been involved with the NUS since the 1980s and is currently Director of Nations within the organisation.<sup>14</sup> There has also been some recent work on student activism in particular locations. The fullest is the PhD work of Sarah Webster who has explored political activism at Manchester University and the London School of Economics throughout the post-war period.<sup>15</sup> Webster's research questions the overwhelming focus on the 1960s in discussion of British student activism showing that the 1980s were, in fact, the decade in which the highest number of students was involved in protest activity at these two institutions. This chapter is part of my wider work on students, student attitudes and student activism in the twentieth century, which aims to show the importance of student activism in Britain beyond 1968.<sup>16</sup>

There is extensive literature on the far left in Britain including the contributions within this book, and the previous volume. However, in the main this literature focuses on the impact of students on the membership of far-left organisations rather than exploring how the far left has affected student politics. For example, Celia Hughes argues that students who started university in the late 1960s and joined 'the student movement' brought with them

experience of protesting from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and were quick to join Trotskyist organisations like the IS/SWP and IMG whose membership expanded rapidly from 1966.<sup>17</sup> The growth of these organisations was tied to the success of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) whose most prominent leader, Tariq Ali, was a member of the IMG.<sup>18</sup> However, it was the IS/SWP that grew more rapidly in this period.<sup>19</sup> Ian Birchall, a member and historian of the IS/SWP, argues that there was an 'upsurge in militancy among students' in the late 1960s and that the IS/SWP was able to capitalise on this.<sup>20</sup> While some students who participated in the protests of 1967–68 joined IS/SWP, other scholars, including Hughes, argue that the growth of IS/SWP was built on a base of members from 'working-class homes' who had joined the party in the early part of the decade.<sup>21</sup> In the late 1960s the link between students and the far left was seen as both a positive thing and a threat. A significant contribution to this debate was the volume edited by Alex Cockburn and Robin Blackburn, *Student Power: Problems, Diagnosis, Action*, published in 1969. In it Cockburn argued that 'the emergence of the student movement promises a renewal of revolutionary politics'.<sup>22</sup> He saw that students had 'special responsibilities in ... developing a revolutionary culture as the guarantor of revolutionary practice'.<sup>23</sup> Another contributor to the volume, Gareth Stedman-Jones, saw students as 'a new social force of incalculable significance'.<sup>24</sup> He grappled with the question of where students fit within existing class hierarchies finding that their 'very transience' meant that they were 'neither of the petit-bourgeoisie nor of the proletariat'.<sup>25</sup> Students, he thought, could and should 'assume a vanguard role' but needed to be careful not to 'usurp' the working class.<sup>26</sup> There is wide agreement on the importance of students to the growth of the far left in Britain in the late 1960s and this has often been read backwards to argue for a significant impact of the far left on student politics and the student movement.

The notion that the left was leading the student movement dominated the government, political leaders and the press in the late 1960s and persists to the present day. According to Digby Jacks, communist president of the NUS between 1971 and 1973, it was the press that was the 'major purveyor' of the 'idea of youth as a class or as a vanguard'.<sup>27</sup> Throughout 1968 the *Guardian* offered the most balanced view of the student movement. In January they stated that most students 'tend to be conservative' but noted that there was a 'politically articulate left-wing minority' who 'see the importance of student power as an exemplary wedge' that could 'show workers how to follow suit' in rebellion. They had a less measured view of student politics characterising it as 'inbred, bitchy and complex'.<sup>28</sup> This view of 'student politics', by which they meant debates within the NUS, continued in May when they broke down the many factions within the student movement for



readers including the Radical Students Alliance, Communist Party, IMG, IS/SWP and a variety of others. The main message to readers was that student politics was fractious, inward-looking and inconsequential and that 'left-wing groups see the university students [as]... useful vehicles for radical protest'.<sup>29</sup>

This view of a 'left-wing minority' out of step with the majority of students began to shift in 1969 with the election of Jack Straw as president of the NUS. Straw's election was depicted by *The Times* as 'a big breakthrough for the militant left in student politics'.<sup>30</sup> For the right-wing press the move leftwards of the NUS Executive was a sign that 'extreme left-wing student leaders' were working to 'undermine' the NUS.<sup>31</sup> NUS elections continued to be the focus of mainstream press reporting into the mid-1970s with varying degrees of alarm. In 1973 the *Guardian* reported that 'Trotskyists' were making a bid for the NUS leadership, while *The Times* reported that this bid had been defeated.<sup>32</sup> The machinations of NUS Executive elections were regular features.<sup>33</sup> This reporting reached fever-pitch with the election of Sue Slipman, the first female president of the NUS, in 1977. Slipman was described by the *Daily Mail* as 'Red Sue' and argued to be 'the cleverest and most dangerous student leader to infiltrate through to the top of one of Britain's largest and intellectually most able unions'.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, neither *The Times* nor the *Guardian* ran stories about Slipman's election. In the late 1970s reporting about the NUS elections and student politics generally waned. The only exception was the election of 1982 when the Broad Left lost control of the NUS Executive to the National Organisation of Labour Students (NOLS) who dominated the Executive for the rest of the decade.<sup>35</sup> From the middle of the 1980s the press focused much more on some NUS campaigns and decisions, particularly 'no platform', rather than the intricacies of student politics themselves.<sup>36</sup> Students were not happy with their portrayal in the national press. Writing in the mid-1970s Digby Jacks argued that in the late 1960s 'the press sought to stigmatise students, alienate the general public from them and weaken the effect of their actions'. By the early 1970s Jacks found that this representation was being superseded by a press narrative which treated students as 'irrelevant' pronouncing the student movement 'dead'.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the far left was depicted within the press as instrumental and formative of student politics. This association between the far left and students, however, was not always what those within far-left groups wanted, which is the focus of the next section.

### **The far-left attitude towards students**

The largest far-left party in Britain after the Second World War was the Communist Party of Great Britain. With the onset of the Cold War and the

attack on communist groups within the west, particularly after 1956, the CPGB entered a period of some difficulty. From the late 1950s they focused their efforts on promoting a broad-based alliance among the left.<sup>38</sup> This strategy was somewhat successful as the CPGB was once again growing by the mid-1960s.<sup>39</sup> Despite the CPGB's success, other groups on the far left were also beginning to grow from the mid-1960s. The leaders of what would become the IMG broke away from the CPGB in 1956 allying themselves to the Fourth International and aiming to 'build a viable Marxist organisation'.<sup>40</sup> The other significant far-left organisation among students, the IS/SWP, was created by Tony Cliff in 1950. Both groups had quite small memberships, but each played a significant role in student politics and had varying attitudes towards the role and importance of students to the creation of a workers revolution.

The CPGB was a significant force within student politics from the late 1960s, although it was often not characterised by students as 'far left' because it was part of the mainstream Broad Left alliance. The student membership of the CPGB grew substantially from less than 200 student members in 1959 to over 1,000 in the early 1970s.<sup>41</sup> The CPGB considered 'that the mass of students is capable of mobilisation on a consistent basis in defence of student interests' and could be encouraged to see these interests in a 'wider context'.<sup>42</sup> They were highly critical of the notion of students as "detonator", or of "vanguard" but thought that students needed to 'seek an alliance with the working class'.<sup>43</sup> In the early 1970s members of the CPGB argued that students were closer to the labour movement than they had ever been, due to changes in the backgrounds of students and the economy which meant that more students were coming from, and after graduation would enter, working-class jobs.<sup>44</sup> Students were seen to have an 'essentially transitory relationship to the means of production'. They were 'not directly exploited' and did not yet have the responsibilities 'which ... are an inevitable product of work' which allowed for a unique 'student consciousness' separate from dominant class hierarchies.<sup>45</sup> The student organiser of the CPGB between 1973 and 1975, Dave Cook, wrote a number of pieces about the role and importance of students to the CPGB. He argued that in the 1970s 'the escalation of class conflict ... has drawn militant students closer to the working class'.<sup>46</sup> While students could not be considered part of the working class, they were also not a homogenous group of elite, and had a great deal of potential to be mobilised if the CPGB led them effectively.<sup>47</sup> The CPGB was highly critical of both the IMG and IS/SWP and their attitudes towards students. They depicted the IMG views of 'Student Vanguardists', which they claimed the IS/SWP had also supported in the early 1970s, as utopian and out of touch. Both of these groups, the CPGB argued, would only ever attract a small minority of students. The CPGB, on the other hand, sought 'to involve the

mass of students in action and struggle through their unions – both on the issues that directly confront them (grants, democracy, White Paper, etc.) and in solidarity with the struggles of the working class and those fighting for national liberation and socialism'.<sup>48</sup>

One of the key thinkers within the IMG was Ernest Mandel, a prominent leader and theoretician of the Fourth International. Mandel wrote and spoke about Marxist theory extensively, including the role and situation of students and education within capitalist society. The IMG published one of Mandel's speeches, *The Changing Role of the Bourgeois University*, in the early 1970s which outlined his argument that 'universities can be the cradle of a real revolution'. Universities, he argued, could provide workers with what they needed most: knowledge. In this way, they could serve as the 'bridge' between a theoretical understanding of the nature of the capitalist economy and the practical application of this theory to the transformation of society.<sup>49</sup> As mentioned above, Tariq Ali was a prominent student leader, member of the IMG and also a founding member of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign.<sup>50</sup> Ali's two key focuses – the university milieu and opposition to the Vietnam war – came together neatly in the late 1960s. In working to develop support for the VSC Ali frequently spoke to students describing his tour in early 1968 as a 'virtually non-stop speaking tour for three weeks which would consist of a lunch time meeting on a campus, an afternoon gathering at a polytechnic'.<sup>51</sup> Ali's enthusiasm for student activism is illustrated in an anecdote that he tells about having to incinerate the first issue of *Black Dwarf* produced by Dan Jones as it was 'somewhat hostile to students'.<sup>52</sup>

In early 1970 the editors of *Black Dwarf* suffered a major disagreement and Ali and a few others split off and set up *Red Mole*. Throughout the 1970s this paper had a variety of titles including *Red Weekly* and *Socialist Challenge*. They covered student activity extensively, claiming that they provided 'unrivalled coverage of student politics' and were 'essential reading for all student militants'.<sup>53</sup> While praising student action they were concerned that there was 'no organisation of student revolutionary militants able to put forward a nationally coordinated strategy for the universities'. They agreed with the CPGB view that an increase in students from working-class backgrounds had increased student militancy and that struggles on the shop floor and within universities needed to be seen as part of the same struggle.<sup>54</sup> The IMG called for workers to be led by 'a conscious proletarian party' which could be based on students who needed to 'learn the harsh realities of the class struggle, not simply in libraries but on the streets'.<sup>55</sup> In 1970 Ali was involved in the formation of a 'revolutionary Marxist youth organisation', the Spartacus League, whose supporters were members of the IMG. The Spartacus League focused on young people including workers, the unemployed, school children and students in further and higher education. They denied

the notion of a student vanguard, but argued that ‘student struggles are important and must be fought ... [because they are] related to the class struggle’.<sup>56</sup> While the Spartacus League thought that ‘the student movement plays a temporary vanguard role’, it would only be effective if students were led by a ‘revolutionary Marxist organisation’, such as the IMG, who could link students and workers.<sup>57</sup> Despite the importance of the IMG in the late 1960s the group did not grow substantially in the 1970s and was dissolved in the early 1980s. Some have credited the IMG’s ‘investment in the student movement’ as a central factor in its fading into obscurity, particularly in contrast to the rising fortunes of the IS/SWP.<sup>58</sup>

In contrast to the IMG’s embrace of student activism, the IS/SWP focused their attention on workers as key to creating revolution. While they coveted student support, and sought to direct student activities, they had a rather ambivalent view of the importance of the student movement and individual students.<sup>59</sup> The founder of the IS/SWP, Tony Cliff, was the key theorist of the group. He maintained that there were no ‘new’ vanguards of the revolution – it was only the working class that could liberate the working class. Birchall characterised notions of ‘red bases’ and the ‘student vanguard’ as ‘romantic nonsense’, dismissing the idea that students could either replace the working class ‘as the agency of social change’ or that there could be an alliance between students and workers ‘as equal partners’. Student, he said, should not be ignored as ‘a number of them could be won to a revolutionary organisation and be integrated into it’ but they would not, and should not, direct it.<sup>60</sup> The IS/SWP owed a great deal of their initial growth in the late 1960s to the involvement of students. They grew from 200 members in 1964 to 1,000 members in 1968.<sup>61</sup> From 1969 their policy ‘Turn to Class’ sought to distance themselves from their student membership and focus on building their base within the working class.<sup>62</sup> This work is reflected in their change of membership which grew from 880 in 1970 to 2,351 by 1972, 26 per cent of whom were manual workers and 31 per cent white collar workers. By 1974 membership was near 4,000 and ‘56 factory branches had been formed’.<sup>63</sup>

This focus on industry shifted again in 1974 with a new strategy called ‘Steer Left’.<sup>64</sup> This marked a significantly increased interest in student politics, particularly through the creation of the National Organisation of IS Societies (NOISS) which worked to build support within the NUS and offer an alternative to the Broad Left.<sup>65</sup> In 1975 two leading figures within NOISS published an article in *International Socialism* arguing that students were a viable area of focus as the NUS had a membership of 700,000 and ‘British students were on the move again’ protesting against authorities and opposing cuts to grants.<sup>66</sup> Students were seen as important to the organisation as ‘most students will become some form of worker’ and their transitory position

meant that they were particularly susceptible to alienation and, therefore, ready to rebel.<sup>67</sup> While Birchall claims that the IS/SWP withdrew from student politics in 1969 and did not return until 1974, Alex Callinicos and Simon Turner, IS/SWP members, argue that Margaret Thatcher's proposals to change students' union financing in 1972, as Minister of Education, made the NUS a forum for debate between the 'Broad Left and the revolutionary left... principally IS'.<sup>68</sup> The IS, they argue, had 'established a political base in the colleges from which to intervene' in NUS activities.<sup>69</sup> NOISS, they argue, was founded to provide leadership of college-based revolutionaries and had already 'established itself as a force in the student movement'.<sup>70</sup> While students 'will not *automatically* gravitate to the side of the working class' they could be shown that there was a 'real alternative' to the system by a strong revolutionary party based on the workers' movement such as the IS/SWP.<sup>71</sup>

The IS/SWP managed to carry on this success in the early 1980s as the CPGB declined, painting themselves as the only viable alternative for those left of Labour although their attitude to students shifted during the 1980s.<sup>72</sup> They now recognised that students were 'not a homogenous class' but a 'heterogeneous grouping of young people who come from different classes and who are destined to enter different classes'.<sup>73</sup> Students were seen as potentially very useful as they could erupt 'in an explosive fashion' but too fickle to be depended on.<sup>74</sup>

Throughout the 1960s far-left groups had a presence on English university, college and polytechnic campuses and grew quickly in size as did student members. This presence increased in the 1970s, but was always fragmented and had limited impact on student politics and the policies of the NUS, which is the focus of the following section.

### **Student politics and the far left**

One of the key reasons why students were joining far-left groups in the late 1960s was the lack of alternative within the student movement itself. In particular, this was due to the NUS constitution which, until 1969, did not allow them to discuss issues beyond those that affected students *as such*. This stance led the NUS to be dubbed 'reactionary' or conservative and to the creation of other, more radical, student groups in the late 1960s.<sup>75</sup> Writing in 1969 David Widgery, a student at the Royal Free Hospital Medical School and member of the IS/SWP, accused the NUS of 'boring a generation of students to political death' and argued that it was 'inevitable that students would eventually come to revolt against the menopausal leadership of NUS and its flaccid policies'.<sup>76</sup> An alternative to the NUS first presented itself in February 1967 when 'twelve student leaders' signed a manifesto launching

the Radical Student Alliance (RSA).<sup>77</sup> The RSA was 'wound-up' in 1969 and later became the Broad Left.<sup>78</sup> In 1968 the RSA had been superseded as the group for far-left students by the Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation (RSSF).<sup>79</sup> The RSSF became, for a brief time, 'the primary activist organization of the student movement' and, according to Digby Jacks, 'clearly reveal[ed] a view that students are a vanguard of revolution'.<sup>80</sup> The main supporters of the RSSF were the IS/SWP and the group viewed 'student unions and the NUS as irrelevant'.<sup>81</sup> The RSSF disintegrated in the early 1970s due to a combination of internal schisms, the growth of the IS/SWP and IMG on campuses and the radicalisation of the NUS.<sup>82</sup>

The change in the NUS constitution opened up whole new areas in which the NUS and its student members could, and did, become involved. Straw was elected as a 'Broad Left' candidate who aimed to make the NUS 'respected but not respectable'.<sup>83</sup> This 'broad left coalition' consisted of members of the Labour Party, the Communist Party and 'non-aligned' socialists who united to oppose the leadership of both Conservatives and Trotskyite groups, particularly the IMG and IS/SWP. As president of the NUS Straw worked to break down divisions between students and the wider community, supporting Student Community Action (SCA).<sup>84</sup> This new focus on student connections to the community beyond campus fit with far-left desires to connect student concerns with those of the working class.

The success of the Broad Left and Straw did not herald the end of the presence of the IS/SWP or IMG within the NUS, although it did allow the NUS to re-take the central position within the British student movement from the RSSF.<sup>85</sup> The influence of the CPGB on the Broad Left can be seen in their policies to 'draw the student movement close to the organised working class; to back up and strengthen real militancy in the student world; to support and extend the democratisation of the NUS and the students' unions; and to lead the mass movement to the left'.<sup>86</sup> This new focus can be seen in some of the activities that the NUS, and students more widely, undertook and supported in the early 1970s. For example, in 1972 a number of universities were occupied and offered for the use of striking miners. Tariq Ali spoke to a meeting of students and miners at the University of Essex and reported 'a rare feeling of real, rather than theoretical, unity of workers and the dwellers on the campuses'.<sup>87</sup> According to Jacks, 'Students are in the majority potential trade unionists'.<sup>88</sup> The NUS also worked to build links with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the early 1970s, although these largely came to nothing and were abandoned by the middle of the decade.<sup>89</sup>

While the Broad Left coalition dominated the NUS Executive throughout the 1970s, elections for the Executive remained hard-fought. The ephemera produced by various factions within the NUS for Executive elections provide

an important insight into how politics was discussed among students and how far-left groups were perceived. In 1973 the Broad Left presidential candidate, Mike Terry, was opposed by a wide range of candidates including John Randall, also a member of the Broad Left coalition but standing as an independent.<sup>90</sup> The Broad Left felt under pressure during these elections, producing an eleven page document outlining and critiquing each candidate and slate of candidates. CPGB members of the Broad Left even felt compelled to put their case forward within the mainstream Communist Party newspaper, *Marxism Today*. They asked for support arguing that they could develop a 'mass, democratic campaigning students unions'. They also warned that 'the fight between the Communist Party and the IS will become increasingly more important in the NUS' and that if the Communist Party ignored student politics they would lose the upper hand.<sup>91</sup> Randall was elected NUS president and served two years before the Broad Left succeeded in getting back control of the presidency of the NUS under Charles Clarke. Their election material, however, continued to reveal a sense that they felt under pressure. They argued that both the 'Right and the Ultra-Left' accuse the Broad Left of being 'just a Communist Party Front Election Machine' and defended themselves by providing statistics to show that 'THE BROAD LEFT HAS SUPPORT FROM MORE C[onstituent] O[rganisation]S THAN ALL THE OTHER MAJOR SLATES PUT TOGETHER'.<sup>92</sup>

One of the slates that the Broad Left critiqued was that of NOISS. The Broad Left quoted Simon Turner, the 'IS's student organiser', saying that the focus should be on creating IS societies and linking them together nationally in NOISS suggesting that the IS/SWP aimed to create a rival to the Broad Left or the NUS itself. The official policy of the IS was not to take over control of the NUS, although individual members of the party did, from time to time, attempt to be elected president of the organisation. NOISS was highly critical of the Broad Left and their policies accusing them of not having a definite programme and therefore being the 'perfect cover for the worst sort of opportunism'.<sup>93</sup> NOISS claimed that their support was as wide as the Broad Left, claiming that their inaugural conference 'was attended by delegates from 28 universities, 11 polytechnics, 6 colleges of education, and 6 colleges of further education and technical colleges'.<sup>94</sup>

The IMG also attempted to build an alliance to challenge the Broad Left. Their slate of candidates for the 1975 election was called 'Open Forum' and they stood candidates who wanted to 'build a revolutionary leadership in NUS'.<sup>95</sup> In 1975 too 'Militant' had made waves within the Labour Party and at the NUS where they fielded a 'Militant' slate. They argued that they were the 'official Labour Party candidates' despite the refusal of the Labour Party National Executive to endorse them.<sup>96</sup> Another Trotskyist splinter group, the Workers Revolutionary Party, also stood a slate of candidates for the



1975 NUS election which the Broad Left called ‘Cassandras yelling about the imminent end of everything.’ The Broad Left tried to distinguish itself as ‘*not a Front*, but an *alliance* between Left Labour students in the “Clause 4” Group, Communists and non-aligned socialists’.<sup>97</sup> This must have been at least somewhat convincing as they secured that election and remained in control of the presidency of the NUS until 1982, fielding the first successful female and black candidates for the NUS presidency in Sue Slipman and Trevor Phillips in 1977 and 1978 respectively.

By the early 1980s the fortunes of the Broad Left were shifting. To some extent this was a reflection of what was taking place within national politics. In the early 1980s the Labour Party went through a period of acrimonious internal debates and divisions with members leaving to create the Social Democratic Party and the expulsion of Militant tendency.<sup>98</sup> One outcome of this was a reorganisation of the youth and student sections of the party. Within the NUS, the National Organisation of Labour Students (NOLS) took control of the Executive in 1982 and maintained it into the early 1990s. NOLS was the successor of the Broad Left, which disintegrated as the CPGB split and collapsed in the early 1980s.

Under the leadership of NOLS the political divisions within the NUS changed in character, although the extent to which this was the result of NOLS’ domination rather than wider political shifts is unclear. The dominance of NOLS certainly did not spell the end of far-left activity within the NUS or on university and college campuses. For example, one student at Portsmouth Polytechnic in the early 1980s remembered clearly the SWP making their presence known within students’ union debates.<sup>99</sup> Primary evidence does not support the view that the 1980s were a quiescent period in student activism.<sup>100</sup> Interviews with two students at Portsmouth Polytechnic in this period show that students were involved in a wide range of political activities and issues including anti-apartheid work, ‘no platform’ debates, feminism, anti-nuclear issues, solidarity with Chile and Iran among others.<sup>101</sup> However, there was a growing professionalism within the NUS, a concern about their reputation and a desire to be taken ‘seriously’ by politicians and included in high level discussions and consultations reminiscent of the desires of the NUS leadership before 1968. Conservative students were also increasingly organised from the mid-1970s with the Federation of Conservative Students (FCS) claiming to be ‘the largest student political organisation in the country’.<sup>102</sup> The FCS made a concerted effort to increase their influence within the NUS from the early 1970s referring to themselves as the ‘forgotten majority’ of students.<sup>103</sup>

Political debates within the NUS did not just focus on Executive elections but permeated a number of key issues. One issue that was the focus of much



activity by the far left was the relationship between the NUS and trades unions, particularly the TUC. In November 1973 a Con Mech (Engineer) shop steward spoke at the NUS conference, calling for 'the support of the trade union movement and the student movement'. He was 'accorded [a] standing ovation' and a collection was taken to support his strike, which raised £135.06.<sup>104</sup> The following year the issue of students on internships was raised and concerns voiced that 'only 10 per cent joined trade unions'. In fact, 'Ninety per cent of the membership were actively scabbing and blacklegging on the trade union movement' and this was impacting on the NUS's ability to work with the TUC.<sup>105</sup> The NUS Executive were criticised for their 'failure to liaise with the TUC' at the following conference, although this also reflects the lack of interest on the part of the TUC to deal with the student movement.<sup>106</sup>

Disagreements between political factions at the NUS conference were replicated at the level of local students' unions. Unfortunately, the dearth of local students' union archives makes the job of the historian particularly problematic here. From the fragmentary records that exist, alongside interviews of former students, we can begin to unpick the involvement of far-left groups in particular moments of activism on individual campuses. For example, when students in Oxford staged a demonstration on the 5 November 1973 for the creation of a Central Students' Union they were reportedly 'led by International Marxist Group and International Socialist students'.<sup>107</sup> Members of the IS/SWP were typified by their work leafleting 'nearby factories' and were known to wear 'short hair' and dress conservatively to 'better relate to workers'.<sup>108</sup> Birchall described IS/SWP activity among students in this period as 'rather frenetic leafleting of factories'.<sup>109</sup> It is evident, however, that they did not always relate well to fellow students. There are a number of examples of student activists being wary, or downright angry, with the IS/SWP tactics of trying to take over student activities and direct them towards workers revolution.<sup>110</sup> There is also some evidence of the appeal of the far left to students in this period. John Penney, who became a student at Manchester in 1971, recalled joining the IS/SWP as it offered 'a refreshing difference to the incestuous political scene at the university'.<sup>111</sup> The far left were certainly a presence on campus, but all the evidence indicates that this presence was far from encompassing of the student movement or student politics. While some spoke of joining the IS/SWP upon first arriving on campus before being disillusioned by their stance on issues such as gender, others talk about being actively involved in student politics without joining any particular group.<sup>112</sup> Students' unions, both local and national, were fruitful ground for a wide variety of political persuasions and discussions. While those on the far left had more space among students to voice their ideas and policies and

remain credible than they did within national politics, they did not control the student political scene.

### Conclusion

Students, as was increasingly recognised by far-left groups in this period, were not a homogenous group. They came from increasingly various backgrounds and had a variety of experiences while studying. Yet, contemporaries believed that students were 'a definite social group'.<sup>113</sup> The nature of higher and further education changed dramatically between the late 1960s and end of the 1980s as did the character of students and their organisations. There was a distinct and important relationship between the far left and the student movement and student politics. The development of both student activism and far-left groups, particularly the IMG and IS/SWP, in the late 1960s solidified this relationship in the minds of scholars, government and political leaders, and the press. For those in power it was easier to blame the far left for 'infiltrating' the student movement than to take the demands and concerns of students seriously. The student movement seemed to offer far-left groups a potential mass following. Working with students and within student organisations like the NUS was, therefore, seen as a golden opportunity. Many students did become members of these far-left groups if only for a short time. There were, certainly, members of these organisations at most, if not all, universities, colleges and polytechnics in this period.

Despite the intentions of far-left groups, students remained highly politically divided. The far left had a place, with a varying degree of centrality, within student politics and the NUS throughout this period. They were actively involved in political debates within the NUS, but this involvement should not be seen as an indication that students themselves were not politically motivated, engaged in debates and actions based on their own needs and interests. This requires historians to take the views of students more seriously, exploring them in their own right rather than seeing them as simply an off-shoot of far-left politics of the period. It also allows for more insight into the fortunes of the far left in this period. The attitudes of far-left groups towards students reveal wider concerns about the changing nature and role of the working class and the development of capitalism. The ability of these groups to attract students and young people in this period also reveals a great deal about their viability and the difficulties that many of them encountered in the 1980s and beyond. The relationship between the far left and student politics and activism is far more complicated than often assumed and in beginning to unpick it we gain a better understanding of each as well as the wider political context of the period.

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## Not that serious?

### The investigation and trial of the Angry Brigade, 1967–72

*J. D. Taylor*

On the night of 12 January 1971, two bombs exploded outside the home of Robert Carr, Secretary of State for Employment. Care was taken to ensure no one was injured, and responsibility was quickly claimed by a militant group calling themselves the ‘Angry Brigade’. The attack marked the first time a British cabinet minister had been attacked by a terrorist group since the Second World War. Up until now, few knew of the Angry Brigade or the string of minor explosions and shootings against property targets, but the aggressive tone of their communiqué (their fourth in fact) to *The Times* suggested a ratcheting up of the intensity and audacity of their campaign: ‘Robert Carr got it tonight. We’re getting closer.’<sup>1</sup> With no connections to any political party, trade union or official organisation of any sort, the Angry Brigade marked a new kind of British left-wing political protest: one rooted in a libertarian socialism derived from the New Left, the communes, pleasure and horizontalism of the counterculture, and the wildcat strike and combative trade union militancy, new social movements and community activism that would define the energies and victories of the British left over the decade.

It is remarkable then that, over four decades on, historians of the left and of the era more broadly refuse to take them seriously, if at all. Marwick gives them one dismissive mention in his vast *The Sixties*, and they have no mention in the major social histories of this time by Beckett, Black, Clarke, Morgan, Porter, or White.<sup>2</sup> Where discussion occurs, they become transformed into either a romantic or oddball anomaly.<sup>3</sup> A throwaway remark by Michael Mansfield, acting as the defence for one of the ‘Stoke Newington Eight’ later charged with conspiracy for the attacks, is indicative: ‘Pythonesque’, the absurdity of taking themselves too seriously.<sup>4</sup> Even New Left critiques by Stuart Hall, Lynne Segal and others can be summarised in *The Sun*’s glib



headline at the end of the trial – ‘Downfall of the Bighead Brigade’<sup>5</sup> – implying the conceit of having ideas above one’s station, of a vanguardist, self-righteous intellectualism over practicalities or public concern. Right-wing newspapers gleefully published large photos of the sexualised female defendants beside communiqués and dismissive jibes: ‘looney plots’ (*The Sun*), ‘revolutionary claptrap’ (*News of the World*), or ‘bomb-happy destructionists’ living in a ‘Manson-style hippy commune’ (*Daily Express*).<sup>6</sup> Some on the left have rehashed the same dismissals, pointing to a ‘tragic affair’ (Hall) or ‘futile’ adventurism (Jonathon Green), signalling a ‘more macho... desperate politics’ (Segal).<sup>7</sup> Consequently, there is a lastingly inaccurate history of a group with incoherent, big-headed politics, that brought police harassment into the counterculture and were ultimately sent down.

This problem of memory and disavowal is further complicated in that those five ultimately sentenced were convicted on weak conspiracy charges with dubious police evidence, while a further five were acquitted. No one has ever been prosecuted for causing the actual explosions and shootings with which the Angry Brigade were linked. This reflects a combination of skill and luck on the part of the attackers, but indicates why few would forthrightly claim involvement. Stuart Christie, the police’s main suspect though subsequently acquitted of conspiracy, has discussed his knowledge of Angry Brigade members and activities while being precise in not asserting any explicit involvement with them.<sup>8</sup> John Barker, convicted of conspiracy in the attacks, has looked back with unease on any attempt to lionise the Angry Brigade. ‘For one thing we were libertarian communists believing in the mass movement, and for another we were NOT THAT SERIOUS ... like many young people then and now we smoked a lot of dope and spent a lot of time having a good time.’<sup>9</sup>

‘Not that serious’ implies the youthful pleasures of music, drugs and communal living. The Angry Brigade ‘had no dreams or desire to “seize state power” or to kill’, Barker clarified more recently.<sup>10</sup> But there is unease in also looking back with regard to the relative seriousness of the IRA, who had less reservations about killing, be it soldiers (the Official IRA’s Aldershot barracks bombing on 22 February 1972) or civilians (the Provisional IRA’s mainland Britain campaign beginning from March 1973 with bombs at the Old Bailey and Great Scotland Yard, spiking over 1974–75 with the ‘Balcombe Street Gang’).<sup>11</sup> Yet such self-effacing remarks do distract from what was serious and seriously meant by the Angry Brigade: a consistency and breadth of libertarian politics, an attention to new protest movements, a hitherto unappreciated ethical dimension of targeting those personally responsible in a personalising way, and a sophistication of organisation that ultimately prevented the police from finding anyone actually responsible for carrying out the attacks.

This chapter instead proposes to take the Angry Brigade seriously, and in doing so, will present and assess features of their investigation and trial still missing from the historical record. It has a historiographical sub-objective, to raise this problem of memory and disavowal, pertinent to left histories where a given protest movement is perceived not to have succeeded. It also has a political objective. Against the impression of a ‘suicidal diversion’,<sup>12</sup> there is a consistent and hitherto unappreciated politics within the targets, communiqués and suspected list of future targets that indicates a perspicacious intuition, if not rationale, about the nascent trends of neoliberal political theory, the intensification of police surveillance and military repression, and the growing political importance of labour struggles over the 1970s. On the one hand, Christie is right to recognise the Angry Brigade as ‘a thing of its time’,<sup>13</sup> and after the ascendancy of the IRA, any attempt to carry out lethal explosions against British targets would have been calamitous for any protest movement. On the other, there is much in its targets, themes and horizontal, diffuse organisation, as well as the crude police crackdown on it, that forecasts the political weather of the far left in Britain over the 1970s and beyond.

### Defining the ‘Angry Brigade’

From the outset there is a basic methodological problem: who were the Angry Brigade? What few histories of the Angry Brigade exist tend to take for granted that the five individuals prosecuted for ‘conspiracy to cause explosions’ across two high-profile trials (Jake Prescott on 1 December 1971; John Barker, Hilary Creek, Jim Greenfield and Anna Mendleson on 6 December 1972) were actually those who planted explosives or fired weapons at political targets – a charge that no individual was ever found guilty of. Any claim of membership of the Angry Brigade remains tenuous and legally undetermined.

Instead, the argument I will make here – and one I have developed elsewhere in an accompanying analysis of the Angry Brigade’s political and historical contexts – is that the name ‘Angry Brigade’ referred to a loose, disparate milieu of individuals and groupuscules, aligned to a broadly anti-establishment, revolutionary socialist politics.<sup>14</sup> We should take the *Evening Standard*’s claim seriously that ‘they are all angry’, that the Angry Brigade can only be understood as a more active eruption of new protest movements among welfare claimants, trade unionists, women’s liberation, black power, gay liberation and civil rights in Northern Ireland.<sup>15</sup> The turn to more violent forms of protest reflected a frustration that peaceful protest and university occupations, a common tactic in the UK, France, West Germany, the USA and elsewhere, were no longer effective, and may even engender a complacency when dealing with violent state authorities. In the pivotal year of 1968, the

*enragés* of Paris over May and June became outmanoeuvred by de Gaulle, while the increasingly emboldened and popular democratic movements in Prague and Mexico City were later crushed by August and October respectively in brutal displays of state power.<sup>16</sup> Such events mirrored the assassinations of prominent black civil rights leaders in the US (Malcolm X, 1965; Martin Luther King, 1968; Fred Hampton, 1969), which would lead into the FBI's COINTELPRO suppression of the Black Panthers by 1969–70, with the murder of Hampton and the subsequent arrest of many of its members.<sup>17</sup> The murder by police of Benno Ohnesorg on 2 June 1967, and the assassination attempt on Rudi Dutschke in Berlin the following April had a similar galvanising effect.<sup>18</sup> When the October 1968 Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) march to Grosvenor Square involved even greater numbers of protestors (and police) than the earlier March 'Battle of Grosvenor Square', but with no obvious outcome, there was a sense of reaching a stalemate, with further VSC marches in London over 1969 and 1970 involving dwindling numbers.<sup>19</sup>

Despite being in diverse locations and without shared contacts, a minority of students, previously involved in anti-Vietnam protests led largely by New Left-orientated political groups, were each taking up direct action out of a common frustration with existing forms of peaceful protests and parliamentary politics. By 1969, small groups began to emerge: in the US, the Weather Underground's attacks began with the 'Days of Rage' in Chicago in October, and amplified following a 'Declaration of War' issued by communiqué on 21 May 1970, to avenge the death of Fred Hampton.<sup>20</sup> The Tupamaros in West Berlin and Munich had undertaken a small bombing campaign since November 1969, with bank robberies launched by the newly formed Red Army Faction (RAF) from September 1970.<sup>21</sup> Indicating a common shift in tactics towards more overt violence, the RAF wrote in April 1971 that 'We will not talk about "armed propaganda": we will do it.'<sup>22</sup> Making abstract comparisons to the perceived systemic violence of the state (or 'bourgeois violence') against a 'revolutionary violence' or what Marighella had called 'counterviolence' as legitimate opposition in his influential 1969 urban guerrilla manual, the RAF, like the Weather Underground, Angry Brigade and others, frequently saw their protest activist as apiece with Maoist, anti-imperialist and nationalist revolutionary movements across the world.<sup>23</sup>

Though a small nucleus of individuals were probably responsible for the majority of publicised attacks and communiqués of the Angry Brigade, particularly those after 1970, this was among a wider surge of leftist political violence from 1967 to 1972 in Britain, whose tactics, politics and targets cannot be so easily extricated from the Angry Brigade. According to a list made by the Stoke Newington Eight Defence Group (hereafter SN8DG), curated through anecdotes and press clippings, there were around 121 known attacks on property between 3 February 1968 (an explosive rocket by the

First of May group that, like many, failed to explode) and 2 May 1972 (a home-made bomb at an 'E. London football ground').<sup>24</sup> This figure is likely an underestimate, and which in any case indicates the broader problem of political violence and amateur bomb-making across Britain over this period, for which few claimed responsibility. This list included explosions at a nightclub, a school and a DSS office, as well as Welsh nationalist attacks against the Royal Family. Howard Yallop's Home Office laboratory had assessed over 1,100 explosions between March 1968 and August 1971, including 123 home-made bombs against property.<sup>25</sup> When later pressed by Rock Tansey for the defence at the SN8's committal, Commander Ernest Bond was unable to give a figure on the number of left-wing instances of political violence since 20 August 1967, suggesting the police had been unable to keep count.<sup>26</sup>

To avoid ambiguity though, I will introduce the attacks claimed by and attributed to the Angry Brigade, before those linked by the police investigation. Between the machine-gunning of the Spanish Embassy in London on 4 December 1970 (the first attack claimed shortly after by signed communiqué), and the conclusion of the trial of the Stoke Newington Eight on 6 December 1972, there were ten attacks claimed by the Angry Brigade across up to fifteen stamped communiqués sent to the underground press and national newspapers.<sup>27</sup> These include: the Spanish Embassy shooting (communiqué 1); the Department of Employment and Productivity (9 December, communiqués 2 and 3); Robert Carr's home (12 January 1971, communiqué 4); Ford's Essex office (18 March, communiqué 7); Biba boutique during a shop assistants' pay dispute (1 May, communiqué 8); Metropolitan Police Computer Room, attacking police surveillance (22 May, communiqué 9); the home of Ford's managing director, William Batty, and a transformer at Ford Dagenham during an industrial dispute (22 July, communiqué 10); home of John Davies, Minister for Trade and Industry (31 July, communiqué 11); a Territorial Army centre, Holloway, against internment in Northern Ireland (15 August, 'Angry Brigade Moonlighter's Cell'); and the home of Chris Bryant, during a labour dispute (20 October, 'The Brigade Is Angry').<sup>28</sup>

There is a consistent targeting of industrial disputes over 1971, at a time when Heath's Industrial Relations Act was rendering wildcat strikes illegal, restricting the rights of trade unions and precipitating the conflict with the National Union of Miners that would ultimately cause his government to collapse by 1974. Considering the bill as just one facet of the government's 'vicious class war', in collusion with large employers, the Angry Brigade used bombing as a means to 'fight back'.<sup>29</sup> They imagined themselves as representatives of the 'revolutionary working class': 'Where two or three revolutionaries use organised violence to attack the class system ... there is the Angry Brigade'.<sup>30</sup> In bombing their homes, there was an ethical aspiration to make the powerful personally accountable for their decisions in a way

that protests and strikes could not. In their frequent cries of 'Power to the people' in their later, more prolix communiqués after the Carr attack, the Angry Brigade imagined themselves as agents in a revolutionary socialist movement of allied workers and students that they hoped was about to come to life.

Throughout, there is consistent attention to the alienation of the working class by consumerism, conservative sexuality, boring jobs, and a recurring contempt for the organised left and its stiflingly dull, bureaucratic recuperation of dissent. 'The Labour Party, the unions and their minions, the CP with its productivity craze, the same bastards who always sell us out ... with gestures like one day strikes and one day occupations, petitions ... which will achieve bugger all.'<sup>31</sup>

Their politics is anti-hierarchical and suspicious of reforms. The Angry Brigade repeatedly criticised the organised 'old-old Left', in one communiqué equating the Communist Party and International Socialists with Robert Carr: 'We are against any external structure!'<sup>32</sup> This histrionic refusal to ally with others hindered its ability to transmit its political ideas beyond small parts of the underground press. The necessity of shrinking into a smaller, trusted circle isolated the group from shop-floor stewards and organised workers who might have told them that rather than amplifying protests, the bombings were only inviting unwarranted police attention to striking workers, whose struggles were localised and defensive, and not of the broadly anti-capitalist bent of the Angry Brigade.<sup>33</sup>

The communiqués also claimed connection to around sixteen separate attacks which had largely gone unreported, including the BBC broadcast van outside Miss World, London (20 November 1970, communiqué 7); the homes of Metropolitan Police Commissioner Waldron, and Attorney General Rawlinson (30 August and 8 September 1970, originally claimed by 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid' and the 'Wild Bunch' respectively, and later in communiqués 1, 5 and 7); four Barclays' branches (undated, 'communiqué 0'); six Conservative associations (13 January, communiqué 7) and a generator in Altrincham (undated, communiqué 7).<sup>34</sup> The police's conspiracy charge would identify a common 'acid-delay' device linking the attacks to those by the First of May group's 'Revolutionary Solidarity Movement' from 1968–70, targeted against Franco's Spain.<sup>35</sup> These begin with bombs against the Spanish Embassy and Columbia Club (popular with American officers) on 3 March 1968; after a year's inactivity, unexploded bombs at the Bank of Bilbao and Bank of Spain, 2 February 1969; a bomb at the Bank of Spain, Liverpool, on 9 February; and at the Bank of Bilbao, London, on 15 March, where two British men are caught red-handed.<sup>36</sup> After another year's lull, a bomb on an Iberian Airways plane at Heathrow, 10 May 1970; an unexploded device at the construction site for the new Paddington Police Station, bearing Greenfield's

fingerprint, 22 May 1970; an Iberian Airways office, London, 18 August 1970; Heathrow airport, 27 September 1970; and Italian government targets in London, Birmingham and Manchester on 9 October 1970, in solidarity with the Lotta Continua, the latter bearing Mendleson's fingerprint.<sup>37</sup>

Given the use of communiqués and small gelignite explosions outside symbolic property targets, one can agree with the police's premise that this was the work of a singular network. Its core seems to have been based in north London, with others in Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham. Having gained the confidence of their First of May suppliers in France with the attacks over 1968–70, this Angry Brigade began their own campaign, initially against British police targets like Waldron in August 1970, expanding into industrial disputes, women's liberation and Northern Ireland. But with these bombings receiving no press coverage, the group changed strategy, and began using a consistent name, *the Angry Brigade*, producing communiqués with a John Bull printing set and signature stamp, and sending these first to the more sympathetic underground press, then the national papers.

The Carr bombing was the campaign's crescendo – their highest profile target, with most explosive power used. Thereafter they secured largely negative media coverage while unwittingly inviting into the counterculture a newly formed 'Bomb Squad' that would clumsily harass and raid up to forty organisations, including Agitprop, the International Socialists (IS) and International Marxist Group (IMG), and the offices of *IT*.<sup>38</sup> While the Angry Brigade insisted 'we are too many to know each other ... We are not in a position to say whether any one person is or isn't a member of the Brigade' – a claim to incoherence and non-existence repeated by Christie and the SN8DG – it is more likely that a small, trusted network was behind the attacks listed above, with the wider phenomena of hundreds of explosions over these years being the work of many Angry Brigades across the UK.<sup>39</sup>

After a largely fruitless Bomb Squad investigation over 1971, a tip-off led the Bomb Squad to 359 Amhurst Road, which had been rented for only six weeks by Barker ('George Buchanan'), Creek, Greenfield and Mendleson ('Nancy Pye'), the latter two sought by police for cheque fraud since June, with wanted photos circulated in the *Police Gazette*.<sup>40</sup> It is possible that a local informant spotted the four, though the Angry Brigade's network contained at least one police informant, Gerry Osner.<sup>41</sup> While Carr reports that the address was improbably found through monitoring Mendleson's parents' post, another explanation is a tip-off from within the group.<sup>42</sup> Erin Pizzey claims she notified police of the Biba bombing after hearing it being planned, and 'felt it had gone far too far'; one possibility is that the plan to 'spring' Prescott and Purdie out of prison, requiring the use of guns, felt like a step too far into lethality and illegality.<sup>43</sup>

The police raided the property on 20 August 1971, discovering the Angry Brigade's printing set and stamp, as well as a cache of gelignite, detonators and guns. The following morning Christie and, later, Chris Bott were arrested when they visited the flat; and further arrests resulted in Angela Weir and Kate McLean making up the final eight.<sup>44</sup> While the legitimacy of the prosecution evidence would be undermined in court, after August attacks by the Angry Brigade rapidly diminished, with a small number of subsequent attacks of a different character claimed, unconvincingly, by people purporting to represent the group, while police complained of regularly being contacted by hoaxers.<sup>45</sup>

While Barker would claim in his closing speech that this reduction in attacks might reflect a change of strategy on their part, and the 'Geronimo Cell' would insist that the eight were innocent, it is probable that the police had swooped in on what was a safe-house, confiscating their explosives, arresting key individuals and deterring the remainder from risking further incrimination.<sup>46</sup> Energies were now turned to the defence of Prescott and Purdie, and later the SN8DG. Less probable, though not implausible, others may have moved into the IRA, following a trajectory like Rose Dugdale, ex-debutante and Tottenham Claimants Union organiser, who had reportedly offered to put up Mendleson's bail, and was later imprisoned for a bungled IRA art heist in 1974.<sup>47</sup> While many law-abiding far-left campaigns have done everything permissible to preserve their work for posterity's sake, the same cannot be said for the Angry Brigade, and for obvious reasons.

However, found among Amhurst Road, beside the machine guns and gelignite, old bottles of beer and unwashed clothes, piles of books on the Weathermen and black power, Charles Olson and Raymond Chandler, were notes detailing a project Greenfield would call 'reverse sociology', transforming the powerful into an object of study.<sup>48</sup> The prosecution would assert that the detailed plans and notes on Osias Freshwater, then the largest private landlord in London, indicated a future Angry Brigade target.<sup>49</sup> Other individuals named included two cabinet ministers, John Eden (communications) and Lord Carrington (defence); Ray Gunter, chairman of Securicor; and Woodrow Wyatt, Keith Joseph and Nicholas Ridley, all major ideologues and strategists of Thatcher's neoliberal revolution in the following decade. The targets suggest a perspicacious recognition that, against the earlier left's initial anger and violence against the police and military state, that power was more insidious and complex, mediated through wealth, property and political collusion.

Barker and Creek have looked back on the Angry Brigade as a form of protest, hoping to amplify struggles.<sup>50</sup> A remark by the SN8DG summarises the flavour of such protest: 'Its actions are exemplary, designed on the one hand to expose the vulnerability of the ruling class, to enter the homes of



the rulers and show they have no clothes, and on the other hand to show the possibility of the revolution arming itself.<sup>51</sup>

Such protest was at once radical, idealistic, even innocent, while at the same time out of sync with the defensive, localised struggles of the organised left. As Barker says, the Angry Brigade was 'not being serious taken to a new level',<sup>52</sup> and yet innocently serious about actualising its protest. When compared to their now more historicised peers, the Angry Brigade lacked the organisation of the Weather Underground's network of contacts, or a popularity among London's young counterculture comparable to the RAF in West Germany. Yet their choice of targets and political messages indicate greater breadth and depth in thinking, linking up women's liberation and civil rights in Northern Ireland with state surveillance and trade union disputes. Non-lethal bombing was another channel for political protest. Unlike their international peers, the Angry Brigade's final and most spectacular achievement occurred at the Old Bailey in 1972, in an event that would profoundly challenge the British legal establishment.

### **The Stoke Newington Eight**

The trial of the 'Stoke Newington Eight' began at the Old Bailey on 30 May 1972 and ended on 6 December 1972. Like the Prescott and Purdie trial preceding it, it resulted in half the defendants being acquitted, the other half receiving lengthy jail sentences, with a confused and indecisive jury reaching an uneasy guilty verdict on the conspiracy charge. The case effectively hinged on whether the prosecution could prove beyond reasonable doubt that the guns, gelignite and detonators found at Amhurst Road and later Christie's car belonged to the eight, and had not been planted by police, and that the eight could be sufficiently linked into a conspiracy of 'agreement' behind the twenty-five attacks between 1968–71. The trial would become one of the longest criminal trials in English history, the longest since the Tichborne false identity case of 1871, and only recently superseded by the News International phone-hacking trial of 2013–14.<sup>53</sup> Over the course of 111 court days, over 200 witnesses, a thousand pages of depositions, three million words in transcripts, 688 exhibits, three self-defendants, thirty-nine jurors challenged and nineteen excused on grounds of bias, eight days of judge summing up, fifty-two hours of jury deliberation, and at an estimated cost of up to £750,000, the trial resulted in one of the most inconsistent verdicts in legal history.<sup>54</sup>

Already by the time the eight were brought before a pre-trial committal on the 25 January, their case was weakened by the abysmal defence of Prescott in his separate trial, with Purdie, over November 1971, which resulting in a fifteen-year sentence for Prescott on 1 December. Prescott's involvement in



the conspiracy was largely alleged on the weak ‘confessions’ of fellow cell-mates in HMP Brixton, no doubt motivated by aspirations of parole and the *Daily Mirror*’s well-publicised reward of £10,000 for anyone offering information resulting in the prosecution of those behind the Carr bombing.<sup>55</sup> Though debunked in court, Prescott’s handwriting was linked to three envelopes containing communiqués sent to the national press, and this alone was sufficient for the conspiracy verdict. Prescott’s defence also conceded in the charge that the other eight were involved in conspiracy, thereby confirming their guilt in the second trial before it had even begun.<sup>56</sup> Prescott’s prosecution indicated that even weak proof of conspiratorial agreement could result in a prison sentence. Yet the outcry against it galvanised support for the subsequent eight. An advertorial appeared in the *Guardian* the following month from ‘People seeking justice for Prescott and Purdie’, with signatories including *Time Out*, International Socialists’ Executive Committee, Ralph Miliband, Bernadette Devlin MP and John Lennon.<sup>57</sup> Purdie’s unlikely acquittal, secured by not giving evidence in court, thereby requiring the prosecution to prove conspiratorial involvement, also indicated the virtues of a prudent defence.

The defence committee had already organised one protest march to HMP Brixton on 4 September 1971, as well as issuing at least one ‘bulletin’, presenting the defence’s argument within a context of ‘class war’ and the politicised crackdown on the counterculture.<sup>58</sup> After Prescott’s sentencing, the defence group intensified its activities, calling itself the ‘Stoke Newington 8 Defence Group’. Its previously makeshift bulletins became a fully-fledged publication, *Conspiracy Notes*, running for at least three issues from December 1971 to the summer of 1972. It published an explanatory booklet and longer justificatory pamphlet, issued posters, arranged a benefit gig, made trial transcriptions and oversaw contact arrangements among the defendants.<sup>59</sup> Through *Conspiracy Notes*, one traces the development of what become the trial’s most significant features. In the first issue, among complaints about the squalid conditions in HMP Holloway, the defence discusses its mobilisation for a politically symbolic case, inspired less by Purdie and more by the landmark ‘Mangrove 9’ trial of December 1971.<sup>60</sup> The DPP’s case against nine black activists in Notting Hill on conspiracy to incite riot charges collapsed, after the defence was able to convincingly show that the police had equated their activism with criminality, that there was considerable evidence of racism in the police’s relentless surveillance of the black community – a harassment occurring in parallel with that of the counterculture over 1969–70 – and that there was no conspiracy case to answer for. Two defendants represented themselves, Darcus Howe and Althea Jones Leconte, with others defended by Ian Macdonald, who would represent Greenfield.<sup>61</sup> Their strategy bore a number of hallmarks seen later, such as a rigorous

scrutiny of the jury for bias, and an incisive attack on the credibility of police witnesses.

Given the relatively collective nature of the defence, it is difficult to attribute any particular innovation to any one person. A combination of frustration and necessity resulted in Mendleson and Creek defending themselves, joined by Barker. They hoped that this would also enable them to connect with the jurors 'as real people and not ciphers hiding behind lawyers', convincing them of the integrity of their politics and their case.<sup>62</sup> The defence group were legally astute, drawing on a number of recent legal innovations. Aware of the harsh prison sentences meted out to two 'ringleaders' in the Greek Embassy occupation of April 1967 organised by the Committee of 100, the defence acted as a collective, thereby preventing one or two individuals being made an example of.<sup>63</sup> The use of 'McKenzie friends' (a person who accompanies the litigant and assists with note-taking, making suggestions, etc.) by the three self-defendants was legally far-sighted. The recent *McKenzie v. McKenzie* case of 1970 actually concerned family law, and had so far been used in a December 1971 trial of three members of the Highbury and Hackney Claimants Unions.<sup>64</sup>

The defence and its supporting committee proved capable, if not courageous. Kevin Winstain for Christie, Macdonald for Greenfield, and Barker representing himself all convincingly demolished most the prosecution case. David Ellen's handwriting expertise, used to link McLean to the Waldron and Rawlinson communiqués, and Weir to some of the later Angry Brigade communiqués, was undermined by the defence's use of another handwriting expert, Dr Julius Grant, to evoke reasonable doubt.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, rigorous vetting of the jury saw the removal of nineteen jurors on various grounds of bias, including sympathy or membership of the Conservative Party.<sup>66</sup> The broadsheet press would complain that it produced a jury biased in favour of the defence, and even endangered the English jury system altogether.<sup>67</sup> Lord Chief Justice Widgery quickly acted to ensure such jury-vetting did not become legal precedent by January 1973, and would later dismiss the appeal of the four the following June.<sup>68</sup>

Winstain, Barker and Macdonald proved adept at exposing inconsistencies in the police's account of the raid, with doubts raised about collusion as well as unusual lapses in police memory.<sup>69</sup> Winstain asked why DS Gilham found only eleven detonators at the house, while DC Doyle had earlier discovered thirteen: had the other two been planted in Christie's car?<sup>70</sup> Winstain made the jury aware of a parallel case of five Saor Éire members in Hackney, whose Old Bailey case was dismissed out of court after an undercover police agent and his handler were proven to have planted machine guns and explosives.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the Bomb Squad, now led by DCS Roy Habershon, would be subsequently involved in the dubious prosecutions of the 'Guildford Four'

and ‘Maguire Seven’ over 1975–76; and both these and the prosecution of the ‘Birmingham Six’ would be overturned decades later, with evidence of police harassment, false testimonies, inconsistencies in forensic evidence and unbalanced judgements.<sup>72</sup> Given the inconsistencies revealed by the trial, and the subsequently exposed misconduct of police investigations over this time, there are sufficient grounds to dispute the validity of the prosecution against the Stoke Newington Eight. The jury effectively determined the police evidence in Christie’s case was planted – casting wider doubt over the credibility of the rest of the weapons – and perhaps only the printing set, stamp and duplicator found at Amhurst Road linked the four to the conspiracy. Barker’s defence conceded that these were the only incriminating items not planted by police.<sup>73</sup>

Unfortunately, we cannot be party to the fifty-two hours of private jury deliberation, except to note that after the first day the jury were split 7–5.<sup>74</sup> By the end of the third day the judge, Justice James, pressured them to make a verdict that evening by refusing any police-protected accommodation, resulting in the ‘uneasy majority’ of a 10–2 guilty verdict. There was no common ground between prosecution and defence – at least one side was lying, as James reminded the jury. At the same time, to acquit all eight would imply a ‘massive dishonesty’ on the part of the police, something they were pressured not to accept.<sup>75</sup> In the end, the same dubious police evidence was taken to acquit Christie yet convict the other four (albeit with reduced jail sentences), in a most unsatisfactory verdict. Though in their *Time Out* press conference after the trial Bott remarked that the police had come out ‘very badly’, the jury had effectively acquitted them too in accepting the weapons as evidence of guilt.<sup>76</sup>

### Conclusion

The SN8DG complained from the outset about a media ‘blackout’ on trial coverage, but as Des Wilson convincingly replied, the case was ‘so complex and slow-moving’ that few newspapers could justify sending out correspondents.<sup>77</sup> This changed after the trial, with all major newspapers running leading stories on 7 December. The coverage was largely derogatory, but such reports were the first media ‘spectacle’ since the Carr bombing to secure mainstream coverage, and may have introduced the ideas of the Angry Brigade to the public. Internal BBC documents of its Review Board reveal consternation over the apparently lax ‘error of editorial judgement’ which enabled the Angry Brigade to broadcast their opinions on Radio Four’s *World at One*, as well as earlier coverage of the Carr bombing.<sup>78</sup> A silent Creek and eloquent Mendleson were interviewed for ITV’s *World in Action* aired shortly after the trial, with Mendleson highlighting that effective protest was being

criminalised: 'What is illegal, and what is legal? It is the state's definition of what's legal and what's not legal. It's not our definition'.<sup>79</sup> While understandably distancing herself, Mendleson situated the Angry Brigade as just one current in a wider swell of working-class discontent.

Gordon Carr's BBC documentary appeared the following month, presenting to mainstream audiences the politics and development of the Angry Brigade in a critical though informative manner (a book followed two years later).<sup>80</sup> More than any communiqué, the newspaper coverage and TV documentaries introduced the ideas of the Angry Brigade to the public. Nor did the defence group disintegrate. Three hundred candle-bearing protestors were turned away from HMP Holloway on the night of 7 December.<sup>81</sup> Greenfield, Barker and Mendleson were back in court on cheque fraud charges in February 1973, alongside McLean, Bott, Purdie and seven others, and the separate trial added two and a half years to Greenfield's sentence, and an additional year to Barker's and Mendleson's.<sup>82</sup> Their appeal was initiated in March 1973, but the defence were again unable to exploit the weakness of the 'imprecise' conspiracy charge, and with the fallout of the IRA Old Bailey bomb overshadowing proceedings, their appeal was easily dismissed in June (though Widgery did adjust the cheque fraud sentence to run concurrently, and reduced Prescott's sentence to ten years).<sup>83</sup>

The SN8DG had brought together a truly 'disparate set of people', from relatives to politically active friends, as Barker recalls. He adds that it 'imaginatively developed what might be called the better part of AB politics and made more of a mass politics than it had ever done itself', and it continued its momentum after the trial.<sup>84</sup> Members of the defence group became involved in the Up Against the Law collective, with several publications over 1972–75, and involvement in other justice campaigns, like the 'Free George Ince' and 'Free George Davis' campaigns (the latter sabotaging The Ashes of 1975 by destroying the turf at Headingley), as well as assisting the work of PROP (Preservation of the Rights of Prisoners) and the Claimants Unions.<sup>85</sup> But there was a dispersal by the close of the 1970s, and most of these campaigns had fizzled out by the time of Thatcher's election. The *Daily Mail* made a crass scoop by revealing Creek to be suffering from anorexia and in a psychiatric hospital in 1973, while the major newspapers belatedly covered the story of Mendleson's parole in 1977 by pondering what message it sent out to the IRA.<sup>86</sup>

It is the legacy of the Provisional IRA that clouds over the not *as* serious Angry Brigade, alongside the sullen mood of 'atomization and dispersal' that student protestors have described feeling after 1968.<sup>87</sup> But as this chapter has argued, the Angry Brigade are best understood as a radical protest group, and one of the better organised networks among a vast tide of amateur bomb attacks and left-wing political violence over 1967–72. They were also

more than merely a peculiar end-point of the 1960s: their focus on industrial militancy and Northern Ireland anticipated the major constitutional crises facing British governments over the 1970s and 1980s, while their scepticism about the motives and openness of the organised left, and their politics of women's liberation, intimated the major battlegrounds within the left over that same period. Above all, there is something ethically commendable about their consistent attempt, and that of others overseas, to 'bring the war home', their fidelity and seriousness in risking their own lives and freedom to actualise their revolutionary socialism, through communes and pleasure, and through experimenting with forms of protest that might force police and government officials to take notice. As Macdonald later reflected, that attention 'cost a lot of people dearly'.<sup>88</sup> But a similar cost would be exacted from youths in Northern Ireland, in Northern mining towns, and in England's inner cities. Unlike the middle-class radicals who have taken pains to distance themselves from this scene on the long march through the institutions, the young and – in the case of the imprisoned five – largely working-class intellectuals who dropped out into the counterculture were one of many enemies within. The trial and investigation of the Angry Brigade is an exemplary case of the intensification of police repression of dissent over the 1970s, and a legal system that prosecuted and imprisoned these five individuals, and many more subsequently, by any means necessary.

### Notes

- 1 Communiqué 4 in G. Carr, *The Angry Brigade: A History of Britain's First Urban Guerrilla Group* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), p. 239.
- 2 See A. Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958–c.1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 751–2; J. Black, *Britain Since the Seventies* (London: Reaktion, 2004); cf. A. Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); P. Clarke, *Hope and Glory* (London: Penguin, 2004); K. O. Morgan, *Britain Since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); R. Porter, *London: A Social History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994); J. White, *London in the Twentieth Century* (London: Vintage, 2008).
- 3 T. Vague, *Anarchy in the UK: The Angry Brigade* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1997); J. Green, *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counter-Culture* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), pp. 272–92.
- 4 M. Mansfield, *Memoirs of a Radical Lawyer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 31.
- 5 *The Sun*, 7 December 1972, p. 1.
- 6 S. Chibnall, *Law-and-Order News* (London: Tavistock, 1977), pp. 110–11; 'The Bomb Girls', *Daily Express*, 7 December 1972, p. 9.

- 7 S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke and B. Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978), p. 292; J. Green, 'The Urban Guerrillas Britain Forgot', *New Statesman*, 27 August 2001; L. Segal (ed.), *What Is to Be Done About the Family?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 49.
- 8 S. Christie, *Edward Heath Made Me Angry: The Christie File, 1967–1975* (Hastings: Christiebooks, 2004), Kindle edition, location 4489.
- 9 Quotes in Carr, *Angry Brigade*, p. 194.
- 10 Barker, email correspondence with author, December 2015.
- 11 T. P. Coogan, *The IRA* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 385–6; S. P. Moysey, *The Road to Balcombe Street: The IRA Reign of Terror in London* (New York: Haworth, 2008).
- 12 N. Fountain, *Underground: The London Alternative Press, 1966–1974* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 141.
- 13 Christie, *Edward Heath*, loc. 4489.
- 14 J. D. Taylor, 'The Party's Over? The Angry Brigade, the Counterculture, and the British New Left, 1967–72', *The Historical Journal*, 58/3 (2015), pp. 877–900.
- 15 'The Red Badge of Revolution that Is Sweeping Across Britain', *Evening Standard*, 1 December 1971, pp. 22–3.
- 16 C. Hoefflerle, *British Student Activism in the Long Sixties* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 92–6.
- 17 The controversy around the publication of COINTELPRO project files in March 1972, found in a raid by the Citizens Commission of an FBI office at Media, Pennsylvania the previous March, amplified this. See J. Bloom and W. E. Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 27–8, 115–22, 238–45.
- 18 See J. Smith and A. Moncourt, *The Red Army Faction: A Documentary History, I: Projectiles for the People* (Oakland, CA and Montreal: PM Press, 2009), pp. 32–6.
- 19 'Sauce Box', *IT*, Vol. 1, No. 28, 5 April 1968, p. 2; Fountain, *Underground*, pp. 56–60; T. Ali, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties* new edition (London: Verso, 2005), p. 300; and Hoefflerle, *British Student Activism*, pp. 110–11.
- 20 J. Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2004), p. 120; D. Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006), pp. 136–7.
- 21 See Smith and Moncourt, *Red Army Faction*, pp. 583–5.
- 22 RAF, 'The Urban Guerrilla Concept', in Smith and Moncourt, *Red Army Faction*, p. 100.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 24 From an untitled, photocopied bundle, produced by the SN8DG, June 1972. The defence group wrote 'don't know' next to the attacks on Albany Street army barracks (24 September 1971), Bryant (20 October 1971), Post Office Tower (30

- October 1971) and Elverton Street Army Tank HQ (1 December 1971), claimed by the Angry Brigade. This organisation probably had access to the Angry Brigade ‘members’ still at large, in ‘Papers of Elizabeth Wilson and Angela [Weir] Mason’, The Women’s Library, LSE Archives, 7EAW/C/13.
- 25 ‘Expert Makes Bomb in Court’, *Guardian*, 21 June 1972, p. 5.
  - 26 On this date First of May members shot the cars of Spanish diplomats, and the US Embassy, in London – the first Angry Brigade attack in the conspiracy charge of Prescott and Purdie, but dropped for the SN8. Bond’s slippage recorded in SN8DG, *Conspiracy Notes* [Issue 2, undated – March 1972 speculatively], pp. 6–8.
  - 27 Determining exactly the number of communiqués is difficult: none survive, several were sent to different newspapers simultaneously, often differently worded, which not all newspapers published. Carr collected fourteen, but one can add a fifteenth: ‘The Angry Brigade Geronimo Cell’, *IT*, No. 144, 14 December 1972, p. 8.
  - 28 Carr, *Angry Brigade*, pp. 217–26.
  - 29 Communiqué 5, *ibid.*, p. 239.
  - 30 Communiqué 6, *ibid.*, p. 240.
  - 31 Communiqué 11, *ibid.*, p. 245.
  - 32 Communiqué 7, *ibid.*, pp. 241, 243. Even the SN8DG would later reject this, in *If You Want Peace, Prepare for War* (London: SN8DG, 1972), p. 14.
  - 33 Cf. Peter Carter, on behalf of Birmingham shop stewards, in ‘Police Question Strikers on Bombs at Boss’s Home’, *Daily Mail*, 20 October 1971.
  - 34 See Carr, *Angry Brigade*, pp. 237–43.
  - 35 The ‘acid-delay’ links all attacks up to Ford, March 1971; thereafter the technique changes to clockwork. Conjectural reasons for this change may reflect the growing intensity of police surveillance on the First of May after the Carr bombing, requiring a change of bomb-production source; the arrest of Purdie on 6 March 1971, dispersing the group; the move of Barker, Creek, Bott and others from Manchester to London in April 1971, followed shortly after by the Biba bombing. Clockwork delay bombs had only been used twice before in London in May 1970, according to police explosives experts, with one such device bearing Greenfield’s fingerprint. See National Archives (hereafter NA), DPP 2/5017/2.
  - 36 Summarising the DPP’s case, now in the National Archives.
  - 37 DPP, ‘Appeal to the Court of Appeal’, in NA, DPP 2/5014/2, pp. 4–5.
  - 38 On raiding IS and IMG, see International Marxist Group, *Solidarity with the Stoke Newington Eight* [flyer, 1972], in Mary McIntosh Collection, LSE Archives, 3/5/2; and Carr, *Angry Brigade*, pp. 219–25.
  - 39 Communiqué 13, Carr, *Angry Brigade*, p. 248; Christie, *Edward Heath*, loc. 4489; SN8DG, *A Political Statement* (London: SN8DG, 1972), p. 4.
  - 40 Carr, *Angry Brigade*, p. 89.
  - 41 Subsequently revealed in an FOI request: S. Hughes, ‘Inside the Angry Brigade’, *Morning Star*, 19 July 2012. Gerry Lawless had already warned the group of police infiltration back in February 1971 in *Red Mole* – see Christie, *Edward Heath*, loc. 5132. Barker is more sceptical, considering it more likely that Osner was ‘winding the cops up’ – email correspondence with author, December 2015.



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- 43 Pizzey speaking in *The Angry Years*, ITV Carlton, 2004; on the planned jailbreak, see Christie, *Edward Heath*, loc. 5360.
- 44 See DPP, 'Statement of Facts', 1972, in NA, DPP 2/5015/1. Chris Allen and Pauline Conroy were also charged, but by January 1972 the Attorney General instructed the DPP to drop the case for lack of evidence.
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## Protest and survive

### The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Labour Party and civil defence in the 1980s

*Jacquelyn Arnold*

Against the backdrop of increasing public anxiety surrounding the British ownership and potential use of nuclear weapons following three British nuclear tests in 1957, a group emerged to coordinate the anti-nuclear movement in Britain. The genesis and development of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) ran parallel with both the emergence of civil defence as a political concern in Britain and the question of unilateral nuclear disarmament within the Labour Party.

In the second half of the Cold War, CND would become a vocal critic of not only the government's nuclear weapons programme but of their civil defence measures too.<sup>1</sup> Many anti-nuclear campaigners doubted that civil defence could realistically have any humanitarian functions, but the real objection came in the form of civil defence as an adjunct to an overall defence policy based on the use of nuclear weapons. Civil defence therefore became a legitimate target for CND based, as it was viewed, 'upon an attempt to create an atmosphere of security where there is none, and is thereby concerned with conditioning the mind of the public to the idea of nuclear war'.<sup>2</sup>

CND sought to undermine the official narratives of civil defence by using the tools of propaganda and parody to turn government advice and publicity surrounding policies of public protection against itself, and used emotive literature to directly challenge the information distributed by government. CND's activism was often a cause of anxiety for civil defence planners, but to what extent did the coordinated anti-nuclear campaign by CND and its symbiotic but often uneasy relationship with the Labour Party present a real threat to the process of policy making in the 1980s?

## CND and early Cold War civil defence

In 1948, civil defence was defined by the Civil Defence Act to mean: 'any measures not amounting to actual combat for affording defence against any form of hostile attack by a foreign power'.<sup>3</sup> And while this definition officially remained in place until 1986, shifting political priorities constantly sought to redraw the scope and ambitions of public protection. Existing civil defence plans based on the Second World War model suffered a crucial blow when the full destructive capability of the hydrogen bomb became known by the early 1950s and defence policy as well as civil defence policy underwent a degree of change to meet the new threat to the public. The Strath Report of 1955, the result of a committee convened to explore the implications of the hydrogen bomb for Britain and to determine to what extent the country could survive a thermonuclear attack, was pessimistic about the value of civil defence, estimating that a programme of shelter building for the population would cost a prohibitive £1.25 billion.<sup>4</sup> Strath's findings, that if no civil defence measures had been prepared in advance, an attack on the main centres of population in the United Kingdom with ten hydrogen bombs would kill about twelve million people and seriously injure or disable four million others,<sup>5</sup> lay behind the damning view of the 1955 *Statement on Defence* that said of the consequences of a nuclear attack on Britain that: 'central and local government would be put out of action partially or wholly. There would be grave problems of public control, feeding and shelter. Public morale would be most severely tested. It would be a struggle for survival of the grimmest kind'.<sup>6</sup>

CND's campaigning was able to capitalise on this dilemma, which lay at the heart of all post-war civil defence planning. As the scale of potential annihilation and the extent of the limited funds available to deal with it were realised, much of the political rhetoric surrounding civil defence became increasingly couched in terms of 'deterrence' and 'insurance' and less in terms of public protection. Successive governments viewed civil defence not as a genuine attempt to secure the population of the United Kingdom against attack but rather as a political necessity, a bluff designed to ensure the public accepted that nuclear war could be survivable. This ultimately failed, as policy makers knew that nothing short of a costly shelter building programme offered meaningful protection in the face of attack, reducing civil defence to little more than an exercise in public acceptance of the continued existence of nuclear weapons.

Against the wish of party leader Hugh Gaitskell, Labour voted at its 1960 conference for unilateral nuclear disarmament, representing CND's greatest political influence and coinciding with the highest level of public support for its campaign.<sup>7</sup> This decision was overturned at the 1961 conference, but

in the same year CND's newsletter *Sanity* carried the group's first declared position statement on civil defence, which would remain unchanged until the end of the Cold War: 'Civil defence is expressly intended to deceive the public into believing that Britain could survive a nuclear war – a belief which provides a reason for maintaining a nuclear deterrent.'<sup>8</sup> CND's position was advanced by the lack of clarity on the exact nature of policy, and criticisms over the government's 1963 publication, *Advising the Householder on Protection Against Nuclear Attack*,<sup>9</sup> in which a report from the parliamentary Committee on Estimates stated: 'Your Committee do not feel that this pamphlet achieves any useful purpose ... nor do they feel that those who do will be convinced of the effectiveness of the measures proposed therein.'<sup>10</sup>

The decision to place civil defence on a much-reduced 'care and maintenance' basis in 1968 was made by a Labour administration, ostensibly 'in the light of economic and international circumstances',<sup>11</sup> given the perceived reduced risk in the likelihood of war. This apparent abandonment of civil defence met with expected criticism both politically and from the public, and the government's ideological opponents viewed the winding down of civil defence as a weakening of Britain's defence posture that would leave the country open to aggressors.<sup>12</sup> While Labour MP and CND member Hugh Jenkins congratulated the government on ending a policy of 'mass deception'<sup>13</sup> and expressed the hope that Britain's nuclear arms would follow suit, the Conservative opposition denounced the disbanding of civil defence as having ideological motivations, 'in order that the Party opposite can carry out their old fashioned Marxist dogma of more nationalisation'.<sup>14</sup>

When questioned by the opposition in a House of Lords debate on the disbanding of civil defence as to whether the government's assessment of the credibility of the deterrent no longer relied significantly on a strong civil defence policy, Foreign and Commonwealth Minister Allan Gwynne Jones belied the left-wing priorities inherent in Labour's attitude towards defence, stating that 'while the Government are, of course, responsible, and must be, for the security and safety of these Islands and the people in them, it is no good assuring that safety and security at the cost of constantly lowered standards of education, health and living standards in general'.<sup>15</sup>

The Wilson and Callaghan governments from 1974 to 1979 struggled with the problem of how to reconcile increasing defence commitments with a parliamentary party that was largely unsympathetic to nuclear weapons, and during this period Labour continued in office with a manifesto commitment renouncing any intention of acquiring a new generation of strategic nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup> The strongly Callaghan-influenced party manifesto of 1979 represented the last moderate, pro-US defence position that would be seen by the Labour Party for the best part of a decade, with its reiteration of the importance of *détente*, arms control negotiations and limiting the

move towards production of nuclear weapons rather than disarmament.<sup>17</sup> Publically, Labour supported the strategy of civil defence as part of an overall deterrent posture, a policy consistent with that of the previous Conservative administration, in that 'our civil defence planning must also be directed towards deterrence. It must be sufficient to persuade any potential aggressor that, in defence of our freedom, we shall not give in to nuclear blackmail.'<sup>18</sup>

### The second Cold War and the resurgence of CND

Upon their return to power in 1979, the Conservative government announced a review of civil defence planning. In May of the same year, NATO ministers had stressed that civil defence was an essential part of deterrence, defence and *détente* and that weaknesses in civil protection could have damaging effects on the defence of the Alliance military posture<sup>19</sup> and the results of the government review echoed this. Its focus on the insurance aspect of civil defence and plans to protect regional seats of government, but no plans for shelter or evacuation of the public, drew vocal criticism from Labour and CND. Opposition centred on the government's apparent refusal to consider the cheaper option of mass, public shelters<sup>20</sup> while continuing to make available funds for the protection and continuation of government and the large sums of money spent on upgrading Britain's nuclear deterrent. Labour's former Foreign Secretary David Owen encapsulated the arguments from the left when he denounced the government's civil defence policy as morally unjust: 'the governors will go underground, the governed will stay on top'.<sup>21</sup>

With NATO's decision to base short-range nuclear missiles in Europe, the failure of the United States to ratify the Salt II agreement, Soviet military action in Afghanistan and the election of the Thatcher government who quickly announced its intentions to replace Polaris with the more powerful Trident nuclear missile system, CND enjoyed a surge in popularity as anxieties around nuclear weapons peaked in the public's mind. Membership of CND rose from just over 4,000 in 1979 to 9,000 in 1980, 20,000 in 1981 and 50,000 in 1983, rising to approximately 100,000 in 1984,<sup>22</sup> and a specialist subsection Labour CND was established, open to parliamentarians and members of the Labour Party. The popularity of the message of CND during the early 1980s was also reflected in increased support for competing anti-nuclear groups and peace organisations<sup>23</sup> as public backing for unilateralism reached 31 per cent in September 1982.<sup>24</sup>

While some of the original leaders of the organisation envisaged using their political contacts to lobby government and effect change by means of debate and persuasion alone,<sup>25</sup> CND was not an organisation formally affiliated with the Labour Party, choosing to exclude itself from mainstream

politics in the belief that this would allow the organisation to react more quickly to rapidly developing political contexts. However, CND supporters were generally to the left of British politics and in the immediate years after its inception, roughly three-quarters of its supporters were Labour voters<sup>26</sup> and many of the early executive committee were Labour Party members.<sup>27</sup>

The general election defeat of 1979 and the 1980 election of Michael Foot, a founder member of CND, to Labour leader accelerated a rejection of the party's previously moderate stance and heralded Labour's adoption of a far-left policy that did not rely on British nuclear weapons. The influence of CND within the Parliamentary Labour Party was at its strongest during the first half of the decade. In both the 1980 and 1981 Labour conferences, CND persuaded Labour to adopt its line and the party passed resolutions supporting unilateral nuclear disarmament. In 1982, this resolution was approved by the two-thirds majority necessary for it to become part of the party's official policy.

While a unilateralist policy was not universally supported within the parliamentary party, many Labour peers and MPs were sympathetic to CND's views on disarmament and the perceived fraudulence of civil defence, some expressing their support for the organisation in open debate.<sup>28</sup> Labour peer Hugh Jenkins, speaking in the House of Lords in 1982, argued that the popularity of anti-nuclear organisations such as CND lay with the policies of government itself and the failure of the government to 'sustain the pretence of survival in a sufficiently convincing way ... the trouble is that the Government really do not believe it themselves, and if they want successfully to deceive the people, they must first deceive themselves'.<sup>29</sup> As Bruce Kent, General Secretary of CND from 1979–1987, later commented: 'Civil defence was the best thing the government did for CND. It made people realise that the suggestions it contained were absurd.'<sup>30</sup>

Labour contested the 1983 general election with a commitment to cancel Trident and remove all nuclear bases from British soil,<sup>31</sup> but Foot found himself unable to unite his deeply divided party around the CND cause. Some senior figures within the parliamentary party such as Denis Healy and James Callaghan openly questioned whether Labour should be supporting unilateral action, and nuclear disarmament loomed large as an issue on which the deep divisions within the party were laid bare. Even among the supporters of unilateralism the party was split between those who wished to advocate for it and those who believed that to do so would be electoral suicide. Civil defence only compounded these bitter wrangles.<sup>32</sup> However, the issues on which CND campaigned were arguably the most prominent feature of the election which was unusually focused on arguments around defence, to the extent that the Conservative government, concerned about

the reach and impact of CNDs messaging, set up a working group within the Ministry of Defence to counter this.<sup>33</sup>

### *Protect and Survive* and the literature of protest

CND employed a three-pronged approach in its campaigning; political engagement, persuasion and protest. Its activists engaged in widespread direct action alongside more conventional techniques of lobbying and conventional political pressure tactics. CND argued that the nature of the policy making process surrounding nuclear weapons and civil defence was inherently undemocratic due to both the secretive ways in which defence policy was constructed, often with members of the government and parliament itself kept uninformed about key decisions, and the undemocratic nature of deterrence itself, in which if nuclear weapons are to truly deter, a government must be willing to use them no matter what the strength of public opinion against their use. Therefore, while CND recognised that its aims were far-reaching with widespread implications for British defence, which could only be achieved through action by the political authorities, opposition must also be outside the normal democratic channels.<sup>34</sup> A significant weapon in CND's arsenal was its ability to use the government's arguments for civil defence against it, and they were skilled in turning government advice and publicity surrounding civil defence to condemn it. The organisation produced a considerable volume of rhetoric-heavy literature which directly challenged the information produced by government, often contrasting the official narrative of government with one that appealed to the 'common sense' of the public, invoking the horror of nuclear war in an attempt to expose the 'myth' of protection. A 1982 publication by CND supporter Philip Bolsover epitomised the emotional approach taken by CND:

Much of the Government's thinking is, as it frequently indicated, based on the idea that the 'winner' of a nuclear war will be the country that has the most people alive at the end – even if that country is a radioactive rubbish heap! So, if one day you crawl alive from under your table you may stand on the piles of dead and peer through the smoking ruins with joy in your heart – for we may have won. And perhaps, somewhere somebody on the 'enemy' side will be doing as you are doing; hoping that maybe his pile of poisoned, burnt and shattered bodies is smaller than yours – his sign of victory.<sup>35</sup>

Recognising the role that countering official government information could play in the civil defence debate, CND put considerable effort and resources into publishing books and pamphlets for the general public.<sup>36</sup> The publications were compiled by the organisation's research department which produced scientifically based rebuttals of government policy statements, though, as it



has been noted, official government secrecy on the effects of nuclear weapons, one of CNDs most persuasive tools, was such that often the only way of determining the facts was to research in archives in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

The publication of *Protect and Survive*, the government's advice for the public on how to survive a nuclear war, gave particular ammunition to CND in 1980 and it provided a focus for the anti-nuclear movement's criticisms of civil defence. *Protect and Survive* was primarily concerned with informing the public on how to make an improvised shelter in their own homes; or, as the Working Group on Shelter and Evacuation progress report of 1981 put it, 'the hasty construction in crisis from household materials of a "core shelter" in a "fall-out room"'.<sup>38</sup> It was noted in a Cabinet and Overseas Policy Committee meeting in March 1980, however, that the information contained within the pamphlet was recognised to be of such inadequacy that it might be 'unwise to actively promote sales of *Protect and Survive*'<sup>39</sup> after it was published. The government may have sought to limit the damage caused by placing its own sanitised image of nuclear war into the public sphere, but unlike the debate surrounding the nuclear issue of the 1950s and 1960s, it was significantly less easy to control public and media discussion around the realities of nuclear conflict in the 1980s.<sup>40</sup> Both *The Times* and the BBC<sup>41</sup> were openly critical of civil defence planning, and as the only official advice for the public on the subject of civil defence these booklets were widely lampooned.

CND quickly capitalised on this, producing emotive materials critiquing *Protect and Survive* and by extension, the government's position on both civil defence and nuclear weapons. *Protect and Survive* was used as a reference point by critics for bad civil defence policy,<sup>42</sup> and Bruce Kent acknowledged that 'we certainly used *Protect and Survive* to our advantage'<sup>43</sup> CND argued that civil defence was a step towards making the idea of 'limited' nuclear war acceptable, an attempt to convince the public of the possibility of survival. By offering the public a state-approved script on how to respond to nuclear war, the government opened up the apparently unforeseen possibility of critique and reinterpretations of a post-nuclear Britain.<sup>44</sup> CND took full advantage of this opportunity to encourage public nuclear debate. As Bruce Kent stated, 'More than anything civil defence changed the way people thought about nuclear war. CND played no official part in [policy development] but we always ridiculed civil defence and this undermined policy by making it so ridiculous.'<sup>45</sup> CND – whose criticism focused extensively on the contrast between the preparations for government and public survival – argued that the government should put effort into preventing nuclear war rather than preparing for it.<sup>46</sup> A nation forced for the first time to consider a threat they perhaps would previously have preferred to ignore leant popular legitimacy to the activities of CND and with *Protect and Survive*, civil



defence became a central symbol in the nuclear disarmament debate of the 1980s.

### Policy influence and the cancellation of Hard Rock

The disarmament policy of the Labour opposition in the 1980s was tightly bound with the political conditions of the party at the time and as such its policy on nuclear weapons and civil defence was both a cause and consequence of internal developments. Labour increasingly decried the escalating promotion of civil defence as, according to Robin Cook MP, 'an attempt to foment a war psychosis ... making the population more willing to contemplate war'.<sup>47</sup> In June of 1981 a party policy statement denounced the government's civil defence policy as a scandalous waste of resources and stated Labour's official policy:

For a densely populated country like Britain, there can be no effective civil defence against nuclear attack. The only effective civil defence is to ensure that Britain is not involved in a nuclear war, and to oppose all nuclear weapons and nuclear war preparations by Britain or any other country.<sup>48</sup>

Labour's ideological distaste for the nuclear deterrent and what it viewed as the government's corruption of civil defence to fit its hawkish defence agenda could clearly be seen in its support for the CND-backed Labour-controlled authorities' fight against participation in central government civil defence exercises and their declaration as 'nuclear-free zones'. In June 1981, the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party issued an advice note in response to requests for guidance by local authorities that not only offered advice in dealing with civil defence duties imposed by central government but also unequivocally established Labour's ideological position on civil defence, one that was diametrically opposed to the government's:

The Labour Party does not believe that the small civil home defence measures proposed by the government can in any significant way provide protection for the people of Britain against the consequences of nuclear war [...] Civil defence in the sense of protecting the civilian population from the effects of nuclear war does not exist. The government's plans are in fact more concerned with 'Home Defence' designed to protect a small government and military elite.<sup>49</sup>

In response, the government attacked the influence of far-left councillors held responsible for local authority non-compliance and heavily criticised Labour's support for the actions of groups such as CND: 'the truth is that the Labour Party has finally given up any attempt to find a realistic and responsible policy for defence and disarmament. A perpetual protest march is no substitute.'<sup>50</sup>

The government had devoted relatively little time to studying the effects of a coordinated anti-nuclear campaign on the public perception of government policy and did not seem to regard CND or other anti-nuclear groups as a threat to policy until 1980, when they acknowledged that their review of civil defence 'coincided with the CND's revival and, although we have sought to distance civil defence from the nuclear issues, much damage has been done at local level'.<sup>51</sup> In July 1981 it was noted by the emergency planning division of the Home Office that 'we are still awaiting Ministerial decisions about the proposed campaign to present the Government's home defence policy to a public increasingly deluged by CND propaganda'.<sup>52</sup> The effects of the coordinated anti-nuclear campaign by CND and related groups was a cause of anxiety for civil defence planning and policy making and frequently discussed in civil defence progress reports and departmental meetings, as was the necessity of a concerted campaign of defence against the message of CND:

Our increasing anxiety over the CND and END [European Nuclear Disarmament] attacks on civil defence, which we have some evidence to believe are affecting the morale of professional and volunteer civil defence workers, is now shared by both the Ministry of Defence and the FCO which are, of course, more concerned with the wider CND campaign against national defence policy and the nuclear deterrence in particular. We are today meeting MOD and FCO to consider a strategy for presenting a coherent defence of government policy covering both military and home defence.<sup>53</sup>

Despite this assertion, no concerted campaign of information to counter the anti-nuclear message ever appeared. The extent of the government's counter-propaganda amounted to little more than the publication of the poorly distributed pamphlet *Civil Defence: Why We Need It* published in December 1981, in which, it was agreed, the link between civil defence and the nuclear deterrent would not be included.<sup>54</sup> The link between civil defence and deterrence was a dangerous one for the government in terms of support for civil defence: as CND's Bruce Kent knew:

it made people realise that despite what the government was saying, deterrence was not a foolproof arrangement. It was very important to the government: the foreign office put out a statement saying that accidents can't happen but of course they can happen, human error can happen. The government said it was better to have civil defence, but if you are saying that you need to have civil defence you are saying that deterrence is not foolproof.<sup>55</sup>

The government now 'fully recognised'<sup>56</sup> the problems that CND was causing at a local level and in January 1982, a letter to the Home Office from the Home Defence College at Easingwold stated that more effort should be devoted to the potential threat from peace groups: 'our recent and continuing

experience with the anti-nuclear campaign teaches the need to apply all the foresight we can muster to dealing with the much more virulent campaign that we might expect should we come close to war'.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, it was the government's policy to engage with disarmament groups where possible, and there does not appear to be evidence to suggest that the government was deliberately withholding information on civil defence plans and exercises from peace organisations and, subsequently, from the public. A meeting of the Police War Duties Committee in May 1982 recorded that there had been enquiries from peace groups whether there were any special plans for the police in the event of war, whether these plans could be extended to the public and what extent of police participation could be expected in the forthcoming exercise Hard Rock. It was noted in the minutes that while no comment was offered for the last two points, 'in the Home Office view it is advisable to respond to such queries as openly and directly as possible'.<sup>58</sup>

Hard Rock was a major national home defence exercise planned to take place in September and October 1982, designed to test local authorities' civil defence planning and emergency services within a national framework. The planned exercise was dogged from the beginning by the ideological and financial reluctance of local authorities to participate and CND closely aligned itself with this non-compliance, viewing Hard Rock as an opportunity to disrupt central government policy. It stated: 'Hard Rock offers CND groups throughout Britain the chance to mount a nationwide campaign of protest and resistance to the civil defence con trick'<sup>59</sup> and gave their full support to any local authorities choosing not to comply with the exercise. In collaboration with the sympathetic organisation Scientist Against Nuclear Arms, and with unofficial support from Labour's National Executive Committee, CND produced a pack that urged local groups to campaign and 'bridge the gap between the abstract/technical reality and the concrete reality of a nuclear war situation'.<sup>60</sup> Nearly a third of county councils scheduled to take part in Hard Rock voted for non-compliance with the planned civil defence exercise and in the end, twenty out of fifty-four county level authorities declined to take part in Hard Rock and a further seven would only participate on a limited basis.<sup>61</sup> The blame for this failure was considered by the government to be 'in large part as a result of the decision taken by the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party to frustrate civil defence work'.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the government's fear that to officially cancel Hard Rock carried considerable political dangers, and could be seen by some as capitulating to CND and the Labour Party,<sup>63</sup> in July 1982 the government announced that Hard Rock would be postponed. Despite the fact that many of the causes of local authority non-compliance were non-political and contained within the policy itself, CND claimed this as a political victory, stating: 'We believe Hard Rock has been cancelled largely because of our nuclear free zone campaign',<sup>64</sup>

and claiming that ‘the support of local elected representatives gives legitimacy to alternative policies put forward by the peace movement’.<sup>65</sup> The government recognised that it was vital for the integrity of civil defence policy that CND be prevented where at all possible from claiming the cancellation of Hard Rock as a victory,<sup>66</sup> but as in using the ‘language of annihilation’,<sup>67</sup> CND forced the government into having to rethink the way it communicated with the public in order to defend its civil defence programme.

In the face of growing unease among the public to the idea of nuclear war, fanned by the success of information-distributing campaigns by CND, the Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Heseltine, in 1983 set up a Ministry of Defence subgroup, Secretariat 19, with the express purpose of explaining ‘to the public the facts about the Government’s policy on deterrence and multilateral disarmament’.<sup>68</sup> Speaking about this period, Bruce Kent acknowledges the difficulty of determining the effectiveness of CND’s campaigning, but was clear on the distinction between the influence of CND on policy determinism and the effect of the group on the government itself: ‘Very difficult to assess the impact of CND [on civil defence policy] but I think the government overestimated the importance [of the organisation]. Heseltine would not debate us, he thought that CND could swing the outcome of the 1983 election but I don’t ever think CND was a major threat to the government.’<sup>69</sup>

### Disarmament and Labour’s 1983 election defeat

In 1979 only 2 per cent of the electorate thought defence was a major issue compared to 38 per cent in 1983.<sup>70</sup> Defence – and the question of nuclear disarmament and deterrence in particular – emerged as one of the most important issues of the 1983 election.<sup>71</sup> Civil defence policy was also of critical importance to the changes that occurred in the Labour Party on the interconnecting levels of policy and political ideas. The 1983 election manifesto of the Labour Party had no reassurances about civil defence to offer the electorate however, emphasising its commitment to collective defence, maintaining its support for NATO but rejecting the nuclear option and choosing instead to focus its efforts on a renewed call for disarmament. It proved much easier to convince both party members and the public of the destructiveness of nuclear weapons than it was that Britain should give up the right to that power altogether; as such, public support for unilateralism had fallen to just 15 per cent of the population by 1983.<sup>72</sup> Labour’s heaviest post-war defeat in the 1983 election allowed the Conservatives to seize upon the Labour’s arguably weak position on national security, objection to nuclear deterrence and calls for unilateral disarmament, equating it with having no defence policy at all, placing Britain in the ‘greatest jeopardy’.<sup>73</sup> Their victory allowed the Conservatives to claim a mandate for their defence, and

therefore their civil defence, policies, and gave Labour the opportunity to draw lessons on the need for a more credible defence policy based on an agreed position.

Much of the Parliamentary Labour Party remained of the opinion that the inadequacies of central government policy could only be explained in terms of the purpose of civil defence being a public relations exercise, primarily concerned with getting the general public to accept the likelihood of war, therefore reducing public pressure on the government to reduce the risks of nuclear war.<sup>74</sup> Some also argued that by spending any money on civil defence at all, the government was effectively preparing for war and knowingly deceiving the public about the survivability of a 'limited' nuclear exchange when in reality, as concluded by the Greater London Area War Risk Study,<sup>75</sup> there was no way that affordable civil defence could be made effective.<sup>76</sup> In debating the *Civil Defence (Grant) (Amendment) Regulations 1983*, Labour criticism touched frequently on the dichotomy at the heart of a civil defence policy, which the left claimed owed its existence to a need to bolster the British nuclear deterrent, pointing out that the very existence of means for public protection admits the possibility of the failure of deterrence.<sup>77</sup> Roy Hattersley, the newly elected Deputy Leader and a more moderate voice within the Labour Party on the subject of disarmament, who would later go on to claim that nuclear deterrence worked during the Cold War,<sup>78</sup> criticised the politicisation of civil defence after the 1983 election and accused opponents of civil defence of using it as an ideological weapon with which to achieve unrelated objectives: 'if civil defence has been politicised, it has not been because of the actions of those who take the unilateral nuclear disarmers' view'.<sup>79</sup>

The Conservative party in turn accused Labour of attempting to block central government policy with a mixture of 'non-co-operation, obstruction, rhetoric and hysteria'.<sup>80</sup> They continued to reference Labour's close ties with CND, which had considered that aligning with Labour during the 1983 election campaign gave an opportunity to directly influence government policy, as an example of more entrenched far-left opposition to civil defence than that which stemmed from distaste for the nuclear deterrent. Solicitor General, Patrick Mayhew, speaking in a House of Commons debate in February 1985, expressed the government's distrust that the actions of CND were solely motivated by a belief in disarmament, questioning whether CNDs remit, and by implication the remit of the opposition who supported the organisation's campaigns, did not extend further than their declared goals:

It would be a mistake to think that opposition to civil defence from the extreme Left arises only from opposition to nuclear weapons. There are deeper reasons, too. For example, in the current journal of CND, called *Sanity*, there is an appeal to members to campaign against the latest civil defence exercise, called *Wintex*. It is in these terms: The systems which already exist for use in a 'civil

emergency' were developed during the 1970s in response to industrial disputes; the Regional Emergency Committees ... were first set up during the 'winter of discontent' in 1978 to deal with the road haulage strike. The most recent example is the development of Police Support Units ... at the moment being used in the miners' strike'. There is no mention at all anywhere in this article, this appeal for campaigning, of nuclear questions. Opposition to nuclear deterrence is one reason for CND's obstruction of civil defence, but support for strikes is another reason, as one would expect in an organisation which is so vulnerable to manipulation by the hard Left.<sup>81</sup>

This criticism had its roots in the 1971 *Home Defence Review*, which sought to redefine the scope of civil defence in line with renewed concerns over domestic security, but despite these concerns, civil defence legislation was never used in industrial disputes. Labour did not campaign against it on this basis, but concerns around the possibility of expanding the definition of internal security featured heavily in the anti-civil defence materials produced by CND who considered the potentially dangerous use of civil defence legislation for 'protection against subversion'.<sup>82</sup> The belief that CND was vulnerable to a level of coercion and control by far-left elements of the Labour Party – and, conversely, that the Parliamentary Labour Party was not only susceptible to pressure from the activist extremes of CND but was actively listening to them – over issues outside of nuclear weapons is an indication of how intertwined Labour and CND were considered to be at this time.

Through the second half of the 1980s Labour continued to align with CND in campaigning on disarmament and for a conventional, non-nuclear defence policy,<sup>83</sup> reiterating the stance that Britain should be 'part of the international process of nuclear build down'.<sup>84</sup> though the party's defeat in the 1987 election cannot be attributed to a single factor or decision, even an increasingly unpopular one such as disarmament. While Labour's leader Neil Kinnock showed outward loyalty to the idea of unilateralism, it became clear to the leadership of the party that for both electoral reasons and for the sake of genuine policy reappraisal unilateral disarmament was no longer tenable and a re-evaluation of defence policy was undertaken.<sup>85</sup> The move away from unilateralism, and the subsequent divergence of the relationship between CND and the Labour Party, reflected changes in the personal convictions of Kinnock, the internal state of the party and improving international developments, which rendered the need for civil defence policy as an adjunct to the nuclear deterrent obsolete.

## Conclusion

Attempting to evaluate the impact of the peace movement on policy is difficult and presents certain methodological challenges.<sup>86</sup> The methods by which

the campaigns of peace groups are measured for success are often imprecise and subject to bias, relying on subjective analysis by the groups themselves or the impressions given by government officials who are often extremely reluctant to admit any influence. Additionally, it can be difficult to ascertain whether the peace groups themselves were ever a catalyst for change or whether more influence can be ascribed to an unrelated shift in public attitudes that granted a movement its strength. CND sought to undermine the official narrative of nuclear weapons and civil defence policy, but the level to which it – and other peace movements active during the last two decades of the Cold War – contributed to the change and succession of such policy continues to be a matter for debate

Until the consensus that dominated British politics during the economic crises of the 1970s came to an end, post-war British politics did not often present the voter with a polarising choice between left and right and it was within this context that Cold War civil defence policy was developed. Rhetoric concerning civil defence changed in response to the party in power but could not be said to be a solely ‘Labour’ or ‘Conservative’ issue until the Conservative election victory of 1979. Civil defence was an issue where the party in opposition almost always carried the strongest argument for reform<sup>87</sup> and consensus was not always reached within the parliamentary party itself. The most significant critics of civil defence were on the far left of the Labour Party and their objections stemmed from ideological distaste for the apparent use of civil defence as a bolster to the deterrent posture and the inherently dishonest practice of leading the public to believe that a nuclear war was survivable. Simultaneously, the possible erosion of civil liberties and the introduction of means of social and political control introduced under the auspices of civil defence legislation were of concern to those of the left, and this closely united Labour and CND during the 1980s.

It is understood that campaigning groups which position themselves outside of the political mainstream are better located to respond to changing social trends and capitalise upon shifting public opinion. New strategies and tactics for protest and counter-protest more often emerge outside of traditional political organisation and it is this approach that CND most often saw yield results in shaping public opinion against civil defence. As a special interest organisation, however, CND did not exhibit sufficient power to significantly disturb the policy equilibrium. The objectives of far-left groups such as CND in the 1980s were considered too extreme for the government to countenance and were therefore afforded ‘outsider’ status, without access to elite-level policy makers.<sup>88</sup> Denied access to the core executive, outside interest groups instead seek to influence policy through parliament or through extra-parliamentary activities such as raising public awareness, seeking to influence the systemic agenda instead. By offering the public an alternative



politics that sought to challenge the official version of Cold War defence, CND's major successes lay not in the realm of policy development but instead within the public sphere and the way it compelled the government to alter the way they presented information about civil defence to the public and the mobilisation of the public in an activism that was in direct contrast to the government sanctioned passivity of their official public advice. As Bruce Kent asserts, 'CND certainly made people stop and think on the issue of nuclear weapons and civil defence was a major factor in changing many people's minds ... while you can never say how things would have been, there was certainly a sense that we had an effect.'<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, given the scale of its ambitions, CND was aware that it could not be enough to persuade the public alone of the rightness of its cause; it must also persuade the government. At no point since the end of the Second World War was the Conservative Party likely to contemplate a defence policy that did not include a nuclear deterrent; on the contrary, the Labour Party has always contained parliamentary members willing to question the nuclear option and CND worked hard to convince the party of its cause. CND's greatest influence within the Labour Party, however, was when the party was in opposition. It has been said of CND that it represented a set of values that were at odds with those dominant in the political culture of the time, but also of fundamentalist left-wing credentials at a time when Labour was locked in internal disarray.<sup>90</sup> It was CND that managed to best exploit the opportunities presented by this internal conflict and the impositional policy approach of the Conservative government.

Ultimately, however, the relationship was an unsuccessful one. The large grass roots support enjoyed by CND in the 1980s did not translate to direct and measurable change in policy selection, and the evidence suggests that low levels of confidence in civil defence did not seriously undermine either the Thatcher administration or the government's support for nuclear deterrence, nor did it lead to an increase in public support for Labour's defence policies.<sup>91</sup>

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## Anti-apartheid solidarity in the perspectives and practices of the British far left in the 1970s and 1980s

*Gavin Brown*

Communists and members of the New Left were involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) from its origins in the late 1950s. In its early days, the AAM welcomed support from individual communists, but was reluctant to be seen to be too close to the Communist Party (CP). Nevertheless, members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) played a significant role at all levels of the movement throughout its history.<sup>1</sup> Fundamental to this was the relationship between the CPGB and the South African Communist Party (SACP) whose cadre played a central role in the exiled structures of the African National Congress (ANC). In contrast, other left tendencies had more complicated relationships with the AAM's leadership.

This chapter examines the relationship of three different far-left tendencies to the anti-apartheid struggle during the 1970s and 1980s. It contrasts the politics and practices of the CPGB, significant currents in British Trotskyism (principally Militant and the International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party (IS/SWP) tradition),<sup>2</sup> as well as the smaller Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG). These groups identified different agents of revolutionary change in South Africa; had different geopolitical understandings of South Africa's place in the world; and their specific conceptualisations of internationalism shaped how they practised solidarity with those resisting apartheid.

Different strategies for mobilising and practising solidarity, entangled with different geopolitical imaginations, and articulated through differing identifications of the specific agents for social and political change (in South Africa and Britain) can be identified in the political orientation of different sections of the British left to anti-apartheid solidarity. This chapter opens by offering a short overview of the history of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain, before examining key aspects of its relationship to the Communist Party, British Trotskyism and the Revolutionary Communist Group. I consider

the different political tendencies in this sequence as it is broadly sequential in terms of the origin of each, and their involvement in anti-apartheid campaigning. Although the chapter comments on events from the 1950s onwards, it focuses on the height of anti-apartheid solidarity work in apartheid's last decade, the 1980s.

### **The Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain**

Apartheid in South Africa, as a racial division of labour founded in white supremacy, was codified in law following the election of the Nationalist Party in 1948. They built upon racist laws enacted during earlier periods of direct colonial rule. Throughout the 1950s, opposition to apartheid grew within South Africa, drawing support not just from African Nationalist organisations such as the African National Congress – and, later, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) – but also from the Communist and Liberal parties, trade unions and sections of the churches. This spectrum of political opinion was also found within the international anti-apartheid movement.<sup>3</sup>

In Britain, the formation of the Anti-Apartheid Movement at the end of March 1960 was a response to the shooting of sixty-nine participants in a PAC-organised demonstration against the Pass Laws at Sharpeville.<sup>4</sup> The AAM grew out of the existing Boycott Committee, which had existed for a year, calling for the British public to boycott South African goods.<sup>5</sup> The Boycott Committee was originally a sub-committee of the Committee of African Organisations in London, and consisted of representatives of the South African Freedom Association, the Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF), along with the ANC, the South African Indian Congress and the Congress of Democrats, as well as individual Christian socialists, socialist intellectuals and members of the Liberal Party.<sup>6</sup> The Anti-Apartheid Movement soon garnered the support of leading members of both the Labour and Liberal parties; but, as I explore in the next section, it maintained a complicated relationship with the Communist Party, especially early on.

The AAM was a national membership organisation, to which national bodies could affiliate. At the hub of the movement was its London-based office. Within five years of the movement's formation, its membership had grown to around 2,500 people nationally. But, given its over-reliance on university students as members, there was a significant churn in membership annually. The membership stayed around this figure until the 1980s. By 1985–86, the membership had grown to approximately 7,500; but peaked at 19,410 members in March 1989.<sup>7</sup> The membership was organised into local branches, but these varied significantly in number and levels of activity. In the late 1980s, the membership of groups in Sheffield and Bristol briefly peaked at around 1,000 members; but few 'large' local groups ever had more

than 200 members on paper, and most relied on a fraction of these numbers to deliver their local campaigning.

The AAM's campaigning was remarkably consistent over the thirty-five years of its existence. As part of its mission to advance freedom and justice in South Africa and Namibia, it sought to bring international pressure to bear on the South African government; and to support and defend those South Africans who opposed apartheid. Given its origins in the Boycott Committee, a significant part of the AAM's work, nationally and locally, was promoting a consumer boycott of South African goods, lobbying the British government to enact UN-mandated economic sanctions and arms embargoes against South Africa, and promoting wider cultural and sporting boycotts of apartheid. The AAM also campaigned for the release of political prisoners in South Africa, opposing the execution of anti-apartheid prisoners, and organising practical support for prisoners and their families. It was not until 1980 that the AAM developed a specific campaign for Nelson Mandela's release and made that a focus of its campaigning.

At both a national level and in many local branches, exiled supporters of the ANC and the SACP played a significant role in the work of the AAM. Officially, the AAM offered support and solidarity to all South African liberation movements. In practice, however, the integration of ANC and SACP cadre into the leadership of the AAM ensured that it largely recognised the ANC as 'the sole legitimate representative' of the South African people.<sup>8</sup> This meant that the AAM seldom campaigned directly for the PAC or Black Consciousness organisations, and largely excluded their representatives from the platform at its demonstrations and public meetings.

### **The Communist Party and the AAM**

Even before the Anti-Apartheid Movement came into being its precursor organisations, such as the Committee of African Organisations in London, agonised about their relationship to (British) communists. Ultimately, while they agreed to accept the support of communists, they attempted to ensure that their own campaigns were seen, from the outside, as politically liberal in order not to deter potential support from the political mainstream. In the early days of the AAM, this distrust was mutual – the Communist Party was suspicious of the role of single-issue campaigns outside the organised labour movement. Nevertheless, as early as June 1960, the Communist Party agreed to support specific campaigns organised by the AAM. The *Daily Worker* could normally be relied upon to distribute AAM literature and report on their campaigns. When the AAM launched a 'penny pledge' fundraising drive in September 1960, to redress its financial difficulties, the Communist Party distributed pledge books to its branches.<sup>9</sup>

Both the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Communist Party of South Africa were affiliated to the Comintern until 1943. In 1950, knowing that the South African government was about to ban it under the Suppression of Communism Act, and also that the government had a complete list of its members (making a move to immediate covert operations unviable), the CPSA chose to voluntarily disband itself. In 1953, former members of the CPSA reconstituted the party as the South African Communist Party (although the existence of the SACP was not publicly announced until July 1960). Britain's colonial political and economic links to South Africa facilitated strong links between the two national communist parties. When the CPSA dissolved itself, it sent several of its leading members into exile in London. There, the CPGB provided the South African communists practical aid and administrative support. This close political relationship predated the creation of the AAM. Given the central role that SACP members such as Yusuf Dadoo and Vella Pillay played in the early days of the AAM, and the high profile of others (such as Sam Kahn) within South African exiled communities in Britain, it is unsurprising that British communists were drawn into the movement's work through their shared ideological perspectives and a commitment to 'fraternal' internationalism. When the ANC sent Oliver Tambo abroad in 1960 to establish an External Mission, he initially established this in London (although its headquarters soon moved to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, before settling in the Zambian capital, Lusaka).<sup>10</sup> In contrast, once the underground leadership of the reconstituted SACP was smashed inside South Africa after the Rivonia raid, the party decided in May 1965 to locate its secretariat in London.

There were, however, always key members of the AAM leadership and apparatus who were keen to limit the visible influence of communists within the movement – Fieldhouse credits Ethel de Keyser, the AAM's Executive Secretary in the late 1960s and early 1970s, later the director of the British Defence and Aid Fund,<sup>11</sup> as playing a key role in this. The AAM's fear of being too closely associated with either the Communist Party or individual communists was exploited in February 1964, when the Foreign Office declared that it was 'largely run by expatriate South African Communists or communist sympathisers'.<sup>12</sup> In response, the AAM continued to keep the role of communists within the organisation quiet (often to the disgruntlement of the CP leadership). In downplaying the role of communists within its own ranks, the AAM was also attempting to obscure the role of SACP members within the ANC. While the AAM often attempted to restrict the sale and distribution of far-left literature at its events, the same restrictions seldom seemed to be applied to the sale of the *Morning Star*.<sup>13</sup>

The CPGB focused its solidarity on the ANC/SACP alliance (to the exclusion of other tendencies). It prioritised national liberation over socialist revolution



in South Africa (in line with the SACP's position). It fostered links with the ANC-aligned and communist-led South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU); but, despite its significant industrial presence in the 1970s, was suspicious of building links with the emerging independent trade union movement in South Africa.

Despite the AAM's fears of being too closely associated with communists, CPGB members sat on the AAM National Committee and were the mainstay of many local AAM groups. The Communist Party played an important role in building support for the AAM within the trade union movement.<sup>14</sup> Despite the stalwart support of CPGB members, the AAM often neglected to list the Communist Party (or well-known CPGB members from the trade unions or the National Union of Students) as sponsors of various campaigns and demonstrations, and found reasons not to have CPGB speakers at their rallies.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to their role in reproducing the AAM as a pressure group with a largely passive membership, a small number of Young Communist League (YCL) members (alongside members of the International Socialists and other tendencies) volunteered to undertake covert missions for the ANC. With the ANC and SACP structures inside South Africa all but destroyed in the mid-1960s, by arrests, imprisonment and exile, a small group of South Africans based in London were charged with reviving the liberation movement's South African presence. The members of this group, which included Yusuf Dadoo, Joe Slovo, Jack Hodgson and Ronnie Kasrils, were all members of the SACP (the ANC did not accept white and Indian members until after the Morogoro Conference in 1969). They set about recruiting volunteers in Britain to act as couriers, passing messages to the remaining ANC operatives in South Africa, and conducting propaganda missions in the country's major cities. Typical of these missions was the creation of 'bucket bombs' that used small explosive charges contained within a bucket to propel screeds of ANC leaflets into the air at major transport hubs, during the rush hour, when black workers were most likely to see them.<sup>16</sup> Although Kasrils recruited young socialists from a variety of political tendencies at the London School of Economics, many potential recruits were identified to him by leading organisers in the CPGB. In particular, George Bridges, the London District Secretary of the YCL and Tony Gilbert at the CPGB's headquarters were key 'talent spotters' for the SACP.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, communists organisers in key trade unions, such as Jack Coward from the seamen's union in Liverpool, and Danny Lyons, a London dockworkers' leader, helped recruit members of the merchant navy to operate as couriers for the ANC. These early operations by the 'London Recruits' were a precursor to the ambitious, larger-scale Operation Vula<sup>18</sup> which played a key role infiltrating ANC cadres into South Africa and rebuilding its underground structures there in the



mid-1980s. Although Operation Vula was principally organised through Connie Braam in the Dutch anti-apartheid movement, even in the 1980s, the British volunteers in its service appear to have been predominantly associated with the CPGB.<sup>19</sup>

It is overly simplistic to suggest that the commitment of the CPGB (and its members) to anti-apartheid campaigning was purely shaped by Cold War geopolitics – many members had an ideological commitment to supporting decolonisation and opposing racism. The Movement for Colonial Freedom was engaged with the formation of the AAM and the two movements worked closely together throughout the 1960s and beyond.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the 1950s, the leadership of the MCF had worked hard to distance itself from the Communist Party; however, communists were involved at every level of the organisation and effectively controlled its structures by the end of the 1960s.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, as the ‘official’ communist party in Britain, the CPGB was politically aligned with both the Soviet Union and the SACP, and interpreted the struggle against apartheid within this context.<sup>22</sup> In effect, this meant supporting of the SACP’s perspective of prioritising the national democratic struggle in South Africa over a more immediate struggle for socialism. They prioritised solidarity with those anti-apartheid organisations which were influenced by, and aligned with, the perspectives of the SACP (and, thereby, the ANC). For them the ANC and its allies were the principle agents of progressive social change in South Africa and they mobilised solidarity for them in this context. The CPGB was very successful in mobilising its members within the national structures of the AAM, and within its local branches, as well as through its influence in the trade unions and the student movement, to advance the cause of the ANC. The corollary of this was that, in effect, this mobilisation also served to limit solidarity for those anti-apartheid organisations that held different geopolitical interpretations about the struggle against apartheid.<sup>23</sup>

### **British Trotskyism’s distance from the AAM**

In the 1960s, when British Trotskyism (in its various forms) was beginning to grow in size and influence, many sections of the left were increasingly looking to social forces in the ‘Third World’ as agents of revolution. Although Trotskyists in Britain were active in various international solidarity campaigns, notably the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC), anti-apartheid campaigning was seldom a focus for them.<sup>24</sup> Most of the main tendencies in British Trotskyism at the time were suspicious of the South African liberation movements (although both Militant and the SWP sought to build entryist groups, in their own image, within the ANC) and sought to promote more

‘workerist’ tendencies within South Africa. They favoured workers’ revolution in South Africa, largely absented themselves from an engagement in the AAM, and focused on building trade union solidarity against apartheid.

Arguably, of the British Trotskyist tendencies in the 1960s and 1970s, the International Marxist Group (IMG) was most sympathetic to national liberation struggles in the ‘Third World’ and played a significant role in the VSC and the Troops Out Movement.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps because they were focused on these other struggles, or, perhaps because of the global distribution of sections of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International to which they were affiliated, the IMG made relatively little impact on the history of the Anti-Apartheid Movement.<sup>26</sup> Like most groups on the far left, the IMG extended the AAM’s analysis of Britain’s economic interests and investments in apartheid South Africa to draw anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist conclusions.<sup>27</sup> Although they celebrated the potential political and economic power of black workers in South Africa, this did not mean that the IMG withheld support from the South African national liberation movements. In contrast to the perspectives of the ANC and the SACP, which prioritised the ‘national and democratic’ struggle over a more socialist programme, the IMG saw the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) as a progressive force that was capable of advancing the unity of black workers in South Africa.<sup>28</sup> For the IMG, a key aspect of anti-apartheid solidarity meant encouraging British workers to take strike action to prevent exports to South Africa, to build direct links with South African workers through their independent unions, and to force the British government to ‘halt its criminal collusion with the barbaric regime in Pretoria’.<sup>29</sup> Drawing on their experience in the VSC, the IMG made a strong case for the power of a mass international anti-apartheid solidarity movement and argued (echoing the position of the RCG a few years later) that it should not prioritise support for one national liberation movement over others.<sup>30</sup> However, the IMG had declined and been dissolved by the time that mass support for the Anti-Apartheid Movement blossomed in the mid-1980s, so they did not play a significant role in arguing for this perspective within the movement.<sup>31</sup>

With the explosion of new independent trade unionism in South Africa in the early 1970s, many key activists in South Africa began engaging with Marxist ideas. Very often, these activists owed more allegiance to the ‘New Left’ in Europe and North America than to the SACP and its political tradition. When two of these young white Marxists, Robert Petersen and Paula Ensor, illegally left South Africa for the UK (via Botswana) in 1976, they eventually came into contact with the Militant Tendency (still within the Labour Party at that time), through dialogue with its leader, the South African Trotskyist, Ted Grant. In London, both Ensor and Petersen continued to work for

SACTU, with Ensor working as personal assistant to John Gaetsewe, the SACTU General Secretary, and Petersen becoming editor of SACTU's London-produced newspaper *Workers' Unity*.

In 1979 Petersen issued a memorandum to the National Executive Committee of SACTU calling on them to prioritise building a combative workers' movement inside South Africa, which was committed to arming the workers in preparation for a future insurrection for social, not just national, liberation.<sup>32</sup> The historian, Martin Legassick and other supporters of the Marxist Workers' Tendency (MWT) within the ANC endorsed the statement. As a result, Petersen, Legassick, Ensor and David Hemson were suspended from the ANC in 1979 and finally expelled in 1985. The group questioned the ANC's promotion of the 'national democratic' struggle, by cross-class forces, over an anti-capitalist struggle based in the self-activity of the working class.<sup>33</sup> One aspect of their argument was to strongly critique the role of the armed struggle in the ANC's strategy:

We have stood for the need to arm the mass movement of the oppressed, led by the organized workers, against the apartheid regime of the employers. Every black worker knows that the struggle in South Africa cannot achieve victory without arms. But the working class must be organized and mobilized in their hundreds of thousands, under a clear revolutionary programme and leadership, before the task of armed insurrection is placed on the order of the day. The leadership of the ANC, SACTU and the CP opposes this perspective.<sup>34</sup>

In January 1981, the Marxist Workers' Tendency published the first issue of its journal, *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*.<sup>35</sup> The MWT operated as a sister organisation of Militant and, by 1979, had won new supporters among a group of activists formerly associated with the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa (APDUSA) in Pondoland and young activists of the Soweto generation who, like the APDUSA supporters, were exiled in Botswana.<sup>36</sup> During the 1980s, the Marxist Workers' Tendency built support among youth and community organisations inside South Africa, including a group of young activists from the Cape Youth Congress around Zackie Achmat who joined the MWT in 1985.

A key statement of the Marxist Workers' Tendency's political perspectives was 'Lessons of the 1950s' by Richard Monroe,<sup>37</sup> a pen name of Legassick,<sup>38</sup> which was published in *Inqaba ya Basebenzi*, offering a critique of the political consequences of the SACP's Stalinism within the Congress Alliance. This repeated the argument that the ANC's move to guerrillaism had been a 'blind alley' that had removed the best working-class militants from South

Africa's workplaces and communities, and undermined the creation of a socialist workers' movement. It concluded by arguing that:

The unwillingness to mobilise and concentrate the full power of the mass movement in nationwide action; the failure to build systematically the working-class organisations necessary to sustain it and defend it against repression; the repeated confusion and demoralisation in the movement, and its eventual splitting between rival organisations and leaderships; the disarming of the working class by the futile turn to an 'armed struggle' by guerrillas – all these had a common root.

They stemmed from the mistaken belief of a middle class leadership – reinforced in this by the 'Communist' Party – that democratic concessions could be won through the support of the liberal or 'progressive' capitalists.

It was upon these hopes, and not upon the power of the working class, that the leadership in the final analysis relied.<sup>39</sup>

In the mid-1980s, when Militant effectively controlled the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS) nationally, the LPYS launched a 'Socialist Links with South African Youth Campaign' (SOLSAY) to establish direct links between young workers and unemployed youth in Britain and South Africa. In 1985, as part of the SOLSAY campaign, Paisley constituency Labour Party (CLP) submitted a resolution to the Labour Party annual conference calling on the party to encourage such links and recognise that the anti-apartheid struggle should be socialist in orientation and 'under the control of the organised working class'.<sup>40</sup> In the margins of a copy of the Paisley resolution lodged in the AAM archive is large cross and a very definitive 'no'. The AAM leadership not only opposed SOLSAY's call that the struggle against apartheid should be an anti-capitalist struggle, Mike Terry wrote to the Labour Party International Department in August 1985 drawing their attention to the work of SOLSAY at a time when the party's leadership was on the offensive against Militant and other 'entryists' among its ranks. At the same time, he 'drew their attention to' material produced by the Southern Africa Labour Education Project (SALEP), the Coventry-based 'research arm' of the Marxist Workers' Tendency.<sup>41</sup> In turn, Labour's National Executive warned their constituency parties and other affiliates not to have anything to do with SALEP and their project of building direct links between British and South African trade unions at a branch level. Indeed the very question of building direct links was one of the key justifications for the eventual expulsion of Legassick, Hemson, Petersen and Ensor from the ANC.<sup>42</sup> Even so, in 1986, the LPYS produced a pamphlet called 'Smash Apartheid and Capitalism – for a Socialist South Africa', which argued that the working class was the only force capable of destroying apartheid.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to Militant, the Socialist Workers Party (as the other largest Trotskyist organisation in Britain<sup>44</sup>) played very little direct role in the

Anti-Apartheid Movement, as an organised force. Having said this, in the late 1960s, when Ronnie Kasrils started recruiting young Britons to undertake covert propaganda missions inside South Africa on behalf of the ANC, a small number of the 'London Recruits' were members of the International Socialists (the precursor of the Socialist Workers Party).<sup>45</sup>

Like Militant and the MWT of South Africa, the SWP critiqued the ANC for promoting a populist, cross-class alliance for national liberation that had 'typically been petty-bourgeois both in social position and in ideology'.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, they criticised the SACP for using organisational weight within the ANC to prop up this all-class alliance and discipline South African workers into supporting it. In the late 1970s, they challenged the shift in Umkhonto we Sizwe's military strategy towards a greater emphasis on taking the armed struggle to urban South Africa, arguing that 'wherever [urban guerrilla warfare] has been attempted – West Bengal, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay – has led to the most disastrous and bloody defeats for the left'.<sup>47</sup>

For the SWP, the struggle against apartheid needed to be an international one under working-class leadership. They argued that the same companies that exploited workers in Britain also exploited South African workers and that this was an argument for 'transforming the national struggle into an international struggle for socialism'.<sup>48</sup> They were prepared to support African nationalist organisations, such as the ANC, PAC and BCM in their struggle against apartheid, but were clear that 'the national struggle in South Africa can succeed only if it is transformed into the struggle for black workers' power',<sup>49</sup> and they saw the task of revolutionaries being to build a revolutionary workers' party in South Africa that was independent of the existing nationalist movements. They argued that the best solidarity that British workers could offer to the struggle against apartheid was to 'destroy the enemy on its home ground'<sup>50</sup> – in other words, in Britain, the SWP prioritised building its own party structures, while it sought opportunities to build a tendency sharing its politics in South Africa. These perspectives largely kept the SWP from engaging in substantial anti-apartheid solidarity work over the years (although they would support local anti-apartheid campaigns from time to time, and would organise interventions at national anti-apartheid demonstrations).

In the mid-1980s, the case of Moses Mayekiso briefly provided the SWP the opportunity to test their perspectives in an anti-apartheid solidarity campaign. In February 1986, the people of Alexandra Township outside Johannesburg revolted after the security police attacked a local funeral. For a brief, intense period of time, they took control of their lives and their community.<sup>51</sup> Key among the community's political leaders at the time was the high-profile trade unionist Moses Mayekiso. He was a 'workerist' who favoured the creation of a new workers' party independent of the ANC and SACP, and advocated the linking of workplace and community struggles.

At the time of the revolt he was the chair of the Alexandra Action Committee (AAC) in the township. He and other leaders of the AAC were arrested at the time and only released after metalworkers went on strike in their support. Nevertheless, Moses Mayekiso and four other AAC leaders (together known as the Alexandra 5) were arrested for treason in June 1986 and put on trial. While still in prison awaiting trial, Moses Mayekiso was elected as the General Secretary of the new National Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) union.

Given his workerist politics, Mayekiso was not trusted by the ANC and its allies (even though one of his co-accused, Oped Bapela, was an underground ANC operative). Consequently, the Alexandra 5 received very little active solidarity from the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain. In 1985, prior to the uprising in Alexandra Township, Mayekiso had visited Britain on behalf of the independent Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) to build links and solidarity among British trade unions and socialists. While in the UK, he was interviewed for the SWP's *Socialist Worker Review*.<sup>52</sup> As a result of the links he made at this time, members and supporters of the SWP were instrumental in setting up the Friends of Moses Mayekiso campaign during his imprisonment and trial. The key player in this was the exiled South African, Terry Bell, a dissident member of the ANC who held dual membership of that organisation and the Socialist Workers Party.<sup>53</sup> The campaign for Mayekiso's freedom was also supported by the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group (see below), which had a tense relationship with Bell who was wary of what he saw as its desire to use 'the Friends as a vehicle to create a "non-sectarian solidarity movement for South Africa" in opposition to the AAM'.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Mayekiso's alleged links with British Trotskyist groups was both used by the South African state in their indictment against him *and* by SACTU to undermine support for the Friends of Moses Mayekiso campaign within local branches of the AAM.<sup>55</sup>

Unlike the CPGB, the various British Trotskyist tendencies were not tied to supporting or defending any external state's foreign policy. They were operating in the context of Cold War geopolitics, but they refused alignment with either of the world's superpowers at the time. In the words of the famous SWP slogan, they supported 'Neither Washington, nor Moscow, but international socialism'. The SWP and Militant may have had different theoretical interpretations of Trotsky's theory of 'permanent revolution', but they refused to relegate the struggle for socialism until after national liberation and self-determination had been achieved in South Africa and elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> For them, the anti-apartheid struggle was an inherently anti-capitalist struggle, and could only be won by the working class on the basis of revolutionary socialist politics. Both tendencies sought to find, encourage and support working-class militants in South Africa (and the exiled diaspora)

who could be won to their style of revolutionary socialism. To this end, both tendencies sought to build groups within (the orbit of) the ANC; although Militant committed greater resources to this task, and had more success in building their South African organisation, the Marxist Workers' Tendency, and organising direct solidarity for it within the British labour movement.

### The RCG's 'non-sectarian' anti-imperialism

The RCG were centrally involved in the formation of the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group in 1982, which sought to re-orientate the AAM into an active solidarity movement taking grassroots action to disrupt British links with South Africa. The RCG and City Group advocated 'non-sectarian' solidarity with all anti-apartheid forces in South Africa – developing close links with Pan Africanists and others, in addition to the ANC. The RCG sought to build an anti-imperialist solidarity movement that linked the anti-apartheid cause to anti-racism in Britain. Through City Group's Non-Stop Picket of the South African Embassy, they demonstrated the potential for a more militant anti-apartheid movement.

The RCG has its origins in the 'Revolutionary Opposition' faction within the International Socialists in the early 1970s.<sup>57</sup> The faction itself soon split after their expulsion from the IS. Under David Yaffe's leadership, the Revolutionary Communist Group was formed in 1974 and began a period of intense theoretical work about the nature of the crisis of capitalism and the role of the labour aristocracy.<sup>58</sup> The RCG believed that the Labour Party and trade unions represented an aristocracy of labour within the British working class who saw their interests as tied to the super-profits of imperialism. This theoretical work also took them on an ideological journey away from Trotskyism and towards a more 'anti-imperialist' position that defended the role of the Soviet Union and its allies (particularly Cuba) in supporting national liberation struggles globally. Consequently, they understood their task as being to win 'the most oppressed' sections of the working class, who had no material interest in imperialist exploitation of the under-developed world, to support anti-imperialist struggles globally.<sup>59</sup> In their manifesto, *The Revolutionary Road to Communism in Britain*, the RCG claimed that:

At all times communists work alongside other anti-imperialist forces to build the widest possible support for liberation in southern Africa. Communists bring to the fore the connection between the struggle against the racist regime in South Africa and the racist imperialist state in Britain. Communists fight to win all forces involved in the struggle against apartheid to the understanding that unless this vital connection is understood and the work accordingly directed towards the most oppressed sections of the British working class, an effective mass solidarity movement cannot be built.<sup>60</sup>



The RCG understood anti-imperialism and anti-racism to be central factors in their fight against world capitalism.<sup>61</sup> One of their central critiques of the AAM was that the campaign against apartheid should not be separated from questions of anti-imperialism globally and anti-racism in Britain. The RCG argued that there was a need to mobilise a mass movement in Britain against apartheid and that one of the key ways to inspire people to a vibrant, militant campaign was through increased use of direct action to confront and disrupt British links with apartheid South Africa.

One of the key ways in which the RCG put these politics into action was through their involvement in the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group. City Group was formed in February 1982 out of the Free Steve Kitson Campaign, after Steve Kitson was detained in South Africa following a visit to his father, David, in prison in Pretoria.<sup>62</sup> Norma Kitson (Steve's mother) worked in a typesetting company with Carol Brickley (who would go on to become the Convenor of City Group, throughout its existence) and other members of the RCG. They were involved in the Free Steve Kitson Campaign and, from the start, City Group was a political alliance between the Kitson family and the RCG. While it is too simplistic to suggest (as many did at the time) that City Group was a front for the RCG, RCG cadres did play a significant role in shaping the group's political perspectives.

The ANC and, by extensions, the AAM, had never fully supported City Group's proposal for a non-stop picket of the South African embassy. Solly Smith, the ANC's chief representative to London at the time (later exposed as a spy for the apartheid regime<sup>63</sup>) repeatedly complained to Mike Terry of the AAM that City Group and the RCG's conduct on demonstrations outside the embassy were threatening to sully the anti-apartheid cause and relations between the ANC and the AAM.<sup>64</sup> When David Kitson returned to London in 1984, following his release from prison in South Africa, the ANC ordered him to denounce City Group and convince the group to desist from picketing South Africa House. Kitson refused and was 'expelled' from the ANC. One of the AAM Executive's frequent complaints about City Group was that they did not restrict the sale of the RCG's paper *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* and 'non-AAM literature' at their events.

Given the representation of South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), ANC and SACP members in the leadership of the AAM, it is difficult to disentangle who actually initiated the various complaints recorded against City Group and the RCG. In March 1984, at a meeting with ANC and SWAPO representatives, the AAM was asked to account for City Group's conduct in the movement. Drawing on the minutes from the meeting, Fieldhouse outlines a number of problematic areas of City Group's conduct:

The group did not confine its activities to its own locality as other groups did, it operated across the whole of London, upsetting the plans of other



anti-apartheid groups and the London Committee, it acted like a national organisation, approaching politicians and national trade unions, it organised demonstrations without consultation with AAM and sometimes in direct rivalry to the Movement, and its members' provocative behaviour at vigils outside South Africa House and at other demonstrations had alienated other supporters and provided the police with an excuse to restrict the AAM's right to demonstrate.<sup>65</sup>

Despite this lengthy list of complaints (some of them justified), Fieldhouse acknowledges that none of the issues actually contravened the written rules of the AAM, 'nor would they have caused much concerns had they not been coupled with an unacceptable ideology'.<sup>66</sup>

In May 1984, on the eve of P. W. Botha's visit to Britain, a volunteer from the AAM office threw red paint over the doors of the South African embassy and the Metropolitan Police took this as an opportunity to ban protests from directly outside South Africa House. The AAM leadership issued a statement against the ban and conducted negotiations with the Assistant Commissioner of Police in an attempt to have the ban overturned. In July 1984, the AAM Executive circulated a statement urging its members and local groups not to attempt to protest outside the Embassy until all avenues of negotiation had been exhausted. In contrast, City Group mobilised campaigners to contest the ban through civil disobedience. By August, 130 arrests had been made in the South African Embassy Picket Campaign (SAEPC) – and five protesters had gone to prison for their repeated contestation of the ban.<sup>67</sup> The police eventually lifted the ban after the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate ruled against the lawfulness of the arrests on 1 August 1984.

Buoyed by the success of the South African Embassy Picket Campaign, City Group convened a meeting of activists from across Britain in late August 1984 to organise a political intervention in the forthcoming Annual General Meeting of the AAM. The group had an ambitious plan to send 260 delegates to the AGM (at a time when all individual members of the AAM were entitled to attend it).<sup>68</sup> City Group, the RCG and their combined supporters submitted a number of resolutions to the AAM AGM and nominated a slate of thirteen activists for election to the AAM's National Executive. Among their submissions were resolutions congratulating the SAEPC on its successful defeat of the police ban, alongside others insisting that the anti-apartheid cause could not be separated from active anti-racism in Britain, and committing the AAM to a more intense programme of street-based activities designed to build a mass movement against apartheid. Although the resolution celebrating the SAEPC was defeated, the other motions were 'passed by the "unexpectedly high turnout" at a very heated meeting which both sides apparently tried to pack'.<sup>69</sup> None of those nominated for the national committee was elected, but again several did better than expected. Viraj Mendis, a RCG member fighting deportation to Sri Lanka at the

time, secured 268 votes (76 votes fewer than the person elected with the smallest vote).<sup>70</sup>

This more or less explicit attempt to take over the national AAM by City Group, the Kitson family and the RCG was the last straw for the AAM's leadership. In February 1985, the national committee agreed to 'disaffiliate' City Group, ceasing to recognise it as a local group of the AAM, effectively expelling the group.<sup>71</sup> City Group and the RCG mobilised their supporters to oppose this move, including a group of (mostly) left-wing Labour MPs.<sup>72</sup> In his history of the AAM, Fieldhouse accuses the RCG of attempting to take over local anti-apartheid groups in 'Dundee, Edinburgh, Merseyside, Leeds, Bradford, Haringey, Bristol and Exeter' (and, in some cases, succeeding in doing so).<sup>73</sup> While some of these were areas where the RCG had branches and cadres, it perhaps both overestimates their numbers, and underestimates how the politics advocated by City Group appealed to a layer of activists with a personal loyalty to the Kitson family, and also to young activists who were genuinely excited by the prospect of a more militant anti-apartheid movement.

The RCG critiqued the Anti-Apartheid Movement for many things. They argued that, in the twenty-six years of its existence, it had failed to mobilise a mass movement against apartheid.<sup>74</sup> They accused the AAM of being too close to the Labour Party and failing to adequately oppose the Wilson government's continued support for South Africa during the 1960s. They noted that the:

[Only] effective mass campaign in this period – indeed in the whole history of the AAM – emerged independently of, and despite opposition from the AAM. This was the Stop the Seventy Tour Campaign (STST) set up in August 1969.<sup>75</sup>

They accused the AAM of being 'sectarian at home', in that it refused 'to adopt flexible and imaginative tactics aimed at attracting the active support of all those prepared to campaign against apartheid', and sectarian 'abroad' for failing to live up to 'its constitutional commitment to support *all* liberation movements in Southern Africa', offering little recognition and no practical support for the PAC or Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO) in South Africa, or Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) in Zimbabwe.<sup>76</sup> Their argument was that it was not the role of a solidarity movement to pick and choose which strands of a national liberation struggle they would support.

In April 1986, despite being outside the national AAM, City Group launched a new Non-Stop Picket of the South African Embassy.<sup>77</sup> They pledged to stay there, continuously, until Mandela was released from prison – a feat that they achieved over the next four years, gaining considerable public support and becoming one of the main symbols of British anti-apartheid

campaigning in the final years of apartheid. A key demand of the Non-Stop Picket was the release of *all* political prisoners in South Africa and Namibia. Officially, this was the position of the AAM as well; but, in practice, they did not actively campaign for prisoners who were not closely allied to the ANC.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, City Group, influenced by the RCG, developed a position of ‘non-sectarian’ solidarity – meaning that they did not believe it was the role of British solidarity activists to choose between members of different Southern African liberation movements (or none). In practical terms, this meant that City Group campaigned for a number of individuals and groups of prisoners in South Africa who were overlooked by the ANC and AAM. This included campaigns for Moses Mayekiso and the Alexandra 5.<sup>79</sup>

The conflict between the AAM, City Group and the RCG impacted on the smaller South African and Namibian liberation movements. From the point that they established a representative in London in 1970, the Black Consciousness Movement made repeated overtures to the AAM, asking them for assistance and support for their events.<sup>80</sup> Fieldhouse argues that this was because ‘the BCM became a totem of the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group and the RCG’.<sup>81</sup> While City Group did work closely with the BCM throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, they were probably closer to the Pan Africanist Congress. Equally, the BCM had had a presence in London for three years before City Group was formed, so their side-lining seems likely to have had more to do with the AAM toeing the ANC line, than any particular result of tensions with City Group and the RCG.

As a result of their analysis of capitalist crisis, the operation of British imperialism, and the role of the labour aristocracy in supporting the interests of imperialism, in the 1970s and 1980s, the RCG believed that the defeat of apartheid was crucial to the prospects for socialism in Britain.<sup>82</sup> This belief led them to prioritise building an anti-imperialist tendency within the British anti-apartheid movement. Given these perspectives, the RCG believed that it was the duty of solidarity activists in Britain to support all progressive anti-apartheid forces in Southern Africa. In practice, this meant that they supported the ANC, but also the Pan Africanists and Black Consciousness organisations, as well as independent trade unions, and the insurrectionary youth in the townships.

## Conclusions

The international campaign against apartheid, from the 1950s until the end of apartheid in 1994, has been described as one of the first truly global social movements.<sup>83</sup> The Anti-Apartheid Movement attracted support from across the political spectrum. Although most organisations on the British far left stated their opposition to apartheid and their solidarity with those

who were resisting it in South Africa, how they practiced this solidarity varied significantly.<sup>84</sup> Key to how different left groups responded was a combination of how they positioned themselves in relation to the geopolitical polarities of the Cold War, how they understood the role of national liberation movements in the 'Third World', and who they understood as the principle agents of (revolutionary) social change in South Africa. This complex mix of factors shaped different organisational perspectives on the relationship between anti-apartheid campaigners in Britain and those resisting apartheid in Southern Africa; as well as the form that anti-apartheid solidarity should take.

The organisations discussed in this chapter were chosen because, between them, they exemplify three of the main political approaches to anti-apartheid campaigning adopted by the (white) far left in Britain. From the origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain in 1959, the Communist Party of Great Britain, in alliance with exiled members of the South African Communist Party, played a significant role in every level of the movement. Their support was crucial to ensuring that the AAM accepted the ANC's authority as the 'sole legitimate' liberation movement representing the majority of the South African people. In following the ANC/SACP line, the AAM prioritised defeating apartheid before contesting capitalism. As Fieldhouse recognises, this was the opposite of the position taken by Trotskyist and anti-imperialist tendencies.<sup>85</sup> As such, the AAM was ideologically opposed to the politics presented by different strands of the far left in Britain (and their allies in South Africa). As both the struggle against apartheid inside South Africa and the international solidarity campaign intensified in the 1980s, these political disputes became particular fierce and time-consuming within the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

The CPGB mobilised its members to play an active role in the AAM, and to build support for it within the trade unions and the National Union of Students. They were active in campaigning for the release of Mandela and other political prisoners, worked to build consumer boycotts in their communities, and they raised funds to send as material aid to the ANC. This was important campaigning work, but it accepted the AAM's twin role as a pressure group, which sought to influence British (and international) foreign policy on South Africa, and a source of political and material support for the ANC in its struggle for democracy and national self-determination.

In contrast, the other political tendencies discussed in this chapter framed their solidarity in anti-capitalist terms. The Revolutionary Communist Group and their allies in the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group sought to build an anti-imperialist tendency within the AAM. They believed that the overthrow of apartheid in South Africa would significantly weaken British imperialism. To this end, they sought to mobilise 'the most oppressed sections of the

working class' in Britain to participate in a mass solidarity movement that was capable of taking direct action to break Britain's political and economic links with South Africa. They believed that it was the duty of solidarity activists in Britain to support all those fighting against apartheid in South Africa. They supported the ANC, but they also offered solidarity to (and built close links with) Pan Africanists, Black Consciousness organisations and the 'workerist' tendencies within the independent trade union movement in South Africa. If the AAM was sometimes cautious about voicing explicit support for the ANC's armed struggle, the RCG was vocal in its celebration of the armed struggle of uMkhonto we Sizwe and the Azanian People's Liberation Army, as well as the insurrectionary violence of the 'young comrades' on the streets of South Africa's townships.

A very different position was taken by Militant and the Socialist Workers Party. Both these Trotskyist organisations believed that guerrilla tactics were a 'blind alley' for the South African working class. These organisations challenged any notion that socialist revolution should be subordinated to achieving non-racial democracy in South Africa. They largely side-stepped any significant commitment of personnel to work within the AAM, and chose to build direct links with working-class militants in South Africa. Militant, in particular, used their influence within the Labour Party Young Socialists and certain British trade unions to build solidarity with their allies in the Marxist Workers' Tendency in South Africa. For them, the purpose of international solidarity was to support the growth of revolutionary socialist currents within the South African working class (a project that was, perhaps inevitably, tied to the party building efforts of their own tendency). When the anti-apartheid solidarity practices of different British far-left groups are compared, they offer a valuable insight into how those groups understood internationalism, practised solidarity, and who they understood as the agents of revolutionary change in the 'Third World' during the Cold War period.

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## ‘The merits of Brother Worth’

### The International Socialists and life in a Coventry car factory, 1968–75

*Jack Saunders*

Shop stewards only fight on pay and conditions – [I] don’t see any political perspective. (John Worth, 1971)<sup>1</sup>

Between 1968 and 1975 Britain saw an upsurge in workplace activism,<sup>2</sup> a phenomenon amply reflected in the motor industry, where workers in all four mass-production car firms – Ford, Vauxhall, Rootes-Chrysler and British Leyland – experienced increasing levels of industrial conflict.<sup>3</sup> Although politically the Communist Party (CP) remained the dominant far-left force, holding the convenor position at several major assembly plants, the three main currents of Trotskyism – the Socialist Labour League (SLL), Militant and the International Socialists (IS) – all also benefited. The SLL built a forty-strong factory branch at British Leyland’s Cowley plant in Oxford, led by Alan Thornett and Reg Parsons, deputy convenors of the assembly plant, and John Power, convenor of the smaller service factory.<sup>4</sup> Militant, focusing primarily on Labour Party entrism, had no factory branches but recruited two deputy convenors, Bob Ashworth and Bill Mullins, at Rover’s Solihull assembly plant. The IS also developed a modest network and by 1973 claimed to have 180 members in the motor industry, at their peak printing 6,000 copies per edition of their rank-and-file paper *Car Worker*.<sup>5</sup> These members included senior stewards at two Chrysler plants (Linwood and Stoke Aldermoor), as well as active branches at other factories, including British Leyland’s Longbridge and Canley, and Ford’s Dagenham and Leamington Spa in the early 1970s.<sup>6</sup> During this period, the IS had some success winning over small clusters of worker activists, largely on the basis of contrasting the dynamism of ‘rank-and-file action’ with the conservatism of the ‘trade union bureaucracy’.

### Factory Trotskyism

Assessing their progress in terms of influence gained and members recruited, John McIlroy contends that a lack of patience and inclusiveness limited the successes of the IS in winning policy arguments and gaining key positions, and ultimately led to decline from 1975 onwards.<sup>7</sup> In doing so McIlroy considers this activity on the party's terms, charting the extent to which sceptical workers could be won to revolutionary politics by persuasive outside organisations.<sup>8</sup> However, as Celia Hughes has argued in her work on the IS in East London, for working-class members another dynamic was often in play. Allegiance to revolutionary groups often reflected an active search by young political activists for explanations for their common experiences rather than conversion to a new faith.<sup>9</sup> Working-class Trotskyists were often insiders in the labour movement, attracted to revolutionary ideas because they suited personal orientations towards work and community.

Neither outsiders, nor wholly conventional, self-consciously 'political' militants had a peculiar role in workplace life, one that offers insights into the dynamics of industrial power politics. As experienced activists their behaviour reveals the limits and possibilities of workers' social power, as well as which social practices and cultural norms predominated. In this chapter, rather than assessing the successes and failures of British Trotskyism, I will look at far-left activism in a factory context, as a lens through which we can understand the wider dynamics of political agency in British workplaces. Drawing on the papers of the joint shop stewards' committee (JSSC) at Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor, I will explore how workplace activism in the 1960s and 1970s shaped workers' agency, becoming the context for new political ideas and new forms of social action. I will then look in detail at discussion among the factory's stewards, using these interactions to show how other activists and the wider workforce understood the relationship between factory life and politics, and how they saw fellow workers who adhered to marginal political ideals.

### Rootes-Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor

Situated in South East Coventry, Stoke Aldermoor was built by Humber in 1908 and purchased by Rootes in 1925, who converted the factory to engine production in the 1960s. The firm was taken over by Chrysler in 1967, but continually weak profits necessitated a £180 million government bailout in 1975. Despite Chrysler's travails the total workforce at Stoke Aldermoor expanded throughout the period, from around 4,000 in 1968 to 6,293 in 1975.<sup>10</sup>

A strong trade union presence was established at the factory in the early post-war period, with membership effectively compulsory after strikes in 1946 and 1947.<sup>11</sup> By 1966 the factory had a conventional pattern of shop-floor activism. Most workers were members of one of four unions – the National Union of Vehicle Builders (NUVB), the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU<sup>12</sup>), the Transport and General Workers Union (TWGU) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) – and voiced their opinion on union matters in workshop meetings and through their representatives on the JSSC. Meetings of that body brought together around sixty shop stewards (from every union) for two hours on the first Monday morning of each month in the factory social club.<sup>13</sup> Day-to-day factory leadership was provided by the convenors, who were elected in a meeting of their own unions' stewards. Together with their deputies and the JSSC officers, they also formed the 'negotiating committee', the factory unions' executive body.

Like a lot of British car factories, workplace trade unionism at Stoke Aldermoor was defined by de-centralisation and informal power structures. The motor industry was the main case study for the Royal Commission on Trade Unions (1965–68), which saw workshop bargaining between shop stewards and lower-level management as the central feature of Britain's industrial relations.<sup>14</sup> Shop steward papers largely confirm this was also the pattern at Stoke Aldermoor, with workshop-based disputes routinely detailed in the JSSC minutes for the mid-1960s. For instance, in 1966 the minutes reference industrial action (strikes and overtime bans) in the track and test department, the body shop and the machine shop, as well as by the electricians and the storekeepers, with further grievances raised by the millwrights, on the engine assembly line, in the canteen and the foundry.

The issues at stake were always highly localised: complaints about bonus levels for particular tasks, objections to earnings lost to machine breakdowns, irritation at overbearing supervisors or disagreements over line speed.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, that year only one factory-wide action was mentioned, a one-day token strike in opposition to the targeting of shop stewards for redundancy.<sup>16</sup> Activism in this period centred on sections and departments rather than entire factories, with solidarity and social power invested in workgroups and their stewards rather than the unions as institutions.

Most industrial protest took place within the workshop and much of it in spite of the factory leaders' disapproval. AEU convenor Ray Wild was a moderating figure who often preached caution to members and stewards. Wild, for instance, told assembled stewards in July 1966 that the firm would close if its new five-year plan failed and that 'a joint effort' was therefore required.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, reacting to a series of walkouts on the assembly line in December 1967, Wild 'implored stewards to keep their feet on the ground', reminding them of the 'procedure to avoid disputes'.<sup>18</sup>

This dynamic between stewards and convenors is vividly reflected in one interaction in 1966, in which Brother Kearns, a steward in the bar shop, was summoned to a special JSSC meeting to respond to accusations that he was 'intimidating people into putting in retimes'. Under piecework the time required for each production task was measured by a rate-fixer, who then set a price for that operation from which bonuses were calculated. A 'retime', where the rate-fixer took another look at a particular job, presented an opportunity for workers to put pressure on lower-level management to improve earnings by increasing the price paid for each work task.

Kearns defended himself on the charge of intimidation, stating that 'he and other stewards felt that he was [being] reprimanded for something that he has been elected to do as steward, and that was to maintain and if possible improve wages and conditions for his members'. He admitted putting in 180 retimes, but claimed this was because 'there was still a lot to go to put the shop in order' and he 'deplored the senior stewards attempting to stop him in his endeavour to put his shop in order just because [works manager] Mr. Sanderson had sent for them'.<sup>19</sup>

In reply, the senior stewards were defensive. Nelson, the TGWU convenor, noted that 'at times there [were] keen stewards ... keen to do their job. The senior steward had to advise these people but not condemn them for being militant'. Moreover, 'it was a benefit to have these people and [he] hoped they would remain as such. But it was the people on the shop floor he had to watch, too many times in the past had [a] good steward been spoiled by the shop floor.'<sup>20</sup>

This discussion on the JSSC illustrates the difficulty senior stewards faced in maintaining organisational discipline. As Kearns pointed out, workshop militancy was the easiest way to improve wages and conditions, and stewards were often specifically elected to resolve problems through localised action. However, for convenors, under pressure from both members and management to keep the factory at work and avoid lost production and wages, controlling this kind of militancy was important.<sup>21</sup> Their repetitive calls for caution reflected both a need to bring order to de-centralised militancy, but also a lack of real control over members, with the JSSC minutes detailing regular complaints from convenors about 'ill-discipline' of all types.

The factory leadership's limited authority also likely constrained their ability to marshal the social power of their members for wider ends, something reflected in the virtual absence of discussion of the world beyond the factory, even on issues that directly affected the workforce. For instance, when the company's perilous financial situation in early 1967 raised the threat of redundancy the possibility of lobbying MPs was mentioned, but the assembled stewards concluded only that: 'anyone who wanted to should go on their own account'.<sup>22</sup> This standoffish attitude towards formal politics reflected

a wider trend in workplace trade unionism, in which a firm division between 'political' and 'industrial' issues marked the boundary between what pertained to the factory's workforce and what did not, something that was often written into the constitution of shop stewards' committees.<sup>23</sup> More generally, there was a hesitancy among factory leaders to organise around issues wider than workshop conflicts.

Most glaring in this regard was the stewards' reaction to the introduction of Measured Day Work (MDW) in 1968. Working under piecework, Rootes production operatives received a bonus according to the number of pieces they completed each day, according to a rate agreed between their steward and the rate-fixer.<sup>24</sup> Although originally the scheme aimed to 'sweat' workers by linking pay to productivity, over the course of the 1950s many workgroups began to put pressure on lower-level management to improve bonus levels. This allowed workers to collectively moderate productivity and still continuously improve wages through short bursts of small-scale industrial action.<sup>25</sup> These improvements then set off a chain reaction as other groups demanded similar concessions, a process that promoted what commentators called 'wage drift' – increases in excess of national agreements.<sup>26</sup> MDW was introduced to control wages by replacing piecework with a flat hourly rate and set work standards negotiated at national level, thereby ending bartering over piece rates.<sup>27</sup> The scheme was part of a wider strategy to introduce 'productivity bargaining' across UK industry in this period, an industrial relations ideal where companies would swap pay rises for improvements in productivity.<sup>28</sup>

These plans had obvious ramifications for Stoke employees' working lives. Many activists argued that the new pay scheme, by ending piecework bargaining, would dis-empower shop stewards, giving management total control over work speed, discipline and pay.<sup>29</sup> Despite such warnings the factory leadership responded only slowly to the changes. Although the scheme was introduced at Rootes' new Linwood plant in 1963, activists elsewhere in the firm offered little opposition despite the likelihood of later extension.<sup>30</sup> Even when stewards noted that the firm was looking to introduce MDW at Stoke Aldermoor in February 1967 there was little further discussion in the following months, despite finding time for a special meeting to talk about 'waiting time' payments – money paid to compensate for piece rate bonuses lost because of machine breakdowns – which would disappear with the new wage structure.<sup>31</sup> In May, workers in the trim shop did ask some questions but received no answers.

Only in July did the body and paint shops organise their own meetings, featuring 'forceful discussions' of the shop stewards' role under the new system. By then the trim shop had already gone through job evaluation – the process of work study that determined the work standards for the new

hourly rate – laying the groundwork for MDW.<sup>32</sup> The company was forcing the new wage structure into the workshops, while the convenors continued to tell stewards it was too early to discuss the changes.<sup>33</sup> It wasn't until November, nine months after it first came up, that the JSSC had a meeting on the subject, with most members only discovering the main details of the plan in May 1968, when a draft of the proposed scheme was leaked against the convenors' wishes.<sup>34</sup>

This reaction emphasises the limitations of Stoke Aldermoor's union organisation in the mid-1960s, particularly in terms of leading the workforce into conflicts which inherently required factory-wide mobilisations. Workshop autonomy combined with leadership conservatism to create an organisation that was dynamic at the workbench but slothful over anything more abstract. In this respect, Stoke was not unique, there were relatively few factory-wide disputes prior to 1968 anywhere in the British motor industry.<sup>35</sup> For those who saw trade unionism as a means to achieving wider change in society, this situation offered frustrations and opportunities: opportunities because such a de-centralised system meant that individual workshops presented a semi-autonomous sphere in which they and their co-workers could exercise real agency; frustrations because factory-wide organisation was largely moribund on 'big' issues.

### The upturn

The arrival of 'productivity bargaining' was the context for a shift in social practices and cultural norms and for the emergence of an IS 'cell'. Each process shaped the other, with a changing environment reshaping the social power of the workforce, encouraging new ideas and new forms of militancy. The emergence of a politicised faction that saw industrial relations in terms of class power and political interpretations of the relationship between labour and capital subsequently reinforced these changes.

The origins of this shift could be seen in a meeting in August 1968, where seventy-seven stewards once again discussed MDW. In the meeting, the senior stewards finally offered a (passive) lead on the issue, arguing it should now be accepted as a *fait accompli*.<sup>36</sup> With wages now centrally determined, this meant that sections could no longer win increases directly and the factory organisation would have to reorganise. Consequently, the JSSC became more pro-active and convenors Wild and Nelson were increasingly involved in complex negotiations and in making recommendations to their stewards and members.

This was most noticeable in the negotiation of annual agreements. In 1969, the Stoke stewards adopted new social practices, widening participation in annual bargaining. They elected a special 'negotiating team' with

representatives for every section of the workforce. This group then engaged in multiple rounds of negotiations, with the stewards voting on what to renegotiate at each stage. When bargaining concluded, they would call a mass meeting, where all 5,000 members would gather at Stoke Green, a local park, to hear a report on negotiations, finally voting on the stewards' recommendation (to accept or to take collective action) by show-of-hands.<sup>37</sup> These new practices had the effect of encouraging greater participation on the JSSC, where average attendance rose from sixty in 1966 to 133 in 1975, and more regular mass meetings – twenty-three between 1969 and 1974, compared to just one between 1966 and 1968.<sup>38</sup> This process mirrored similar developments elsewhere in the industry. Shop steward papers for other factories – including British Leyland's Solihull, Cowley and to a certain extent Longbridge – also reflect a shift towards factory-wide decision making, as does Huw Beynon's work on Ford Halewood.<sup>39</sup>

More distinctive to Stoke Aldermoor was the precise form that this reconfiguration of social practices took. Alongside more exhaustive representation, an increasingly contentious atmosphere emerged on the JSSC. Prior to the late 1960s, the committee was marked by a passive consensus. Most meetings focused on the convenors' reports and featured relatively little debate. The minutes for 1966 and 1967 record just one contested vote in thirty-two meetings.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, from 1968 lively discussions ensued over a range of issues, with different factions staking out moderate and militant positions. For instance, the stewards' meeting in October that year featured an unprecedented defeat for the factory union leaders when a group of engine assembly workers urged the JSSC to support them in a sit-down strike against new work norms. Ray Wild warned the stewards that 'if it came to a walkout the company would welcome this. If any dismissals took place there could be stewards who would never get back.'<sup>41</sup> The stewards nevertheless voted (by show of hands) 41 to 38 against their leaders for a full factory strike in support of the assembly line.<sup>42</sup> Both this style of open, parliamentary-style, contested JSSC meetings and the factory leadership's weak hold over the stewards contrast with more dominant central figures elsewhere, like Dick Etheridge at Longbridge and Joe Harris at Solihull.

### The IS branch

Not coincidentally, it was in this context, with the JSSC a more active, participative and argumentative place, that the International Socialists emerged as a noticeable presence within the factory. Led by John Worth, a fitter in the engine testing department who had joined the company in 1961 and served as a steward since 1964,<sup>43</sup> Stoke's IS branch claimed as many as thirty-eight members at its peak in 1973. A modest number, but sufficient to win



substantial influence, such that in 1971 Worth won the support of half the factory's stewards in the election for JSSC chair, and was later elected deputy convenor of the AUEW.<sup>44</sup>

Hailed as a model to be followed by party comrades,<sup>45</sup> Chrysler IS members contributed to factory life in distinctive but mostly quite conventional ways, concentrating on pushing for more militant positions on regular trade union problems. From when he first made contact with the IS in 1969 to losing his position as shop steward in 1972, most of John Worth's interventions on the JSSC related to health and safety, discipline, job and wage security, productivity and union democracy.<sup>46</sup> On other occasions, Worth and other IS-linked stewards raised more distinctive issues, like organising a collection for the Fine Tubes strike in Plymouth (one of the *cause celebres* of the IS), and encouraging attendance at a meeting of the Institute for Workers Control. These were causes identifiable with the IS, but not exclusively so, and solidarity collections and sending delegates to conferences remained well within the social norms of workplace trade unionism. Although they were regularly raised in workplace bulletins, the most controversial interests of the IS – Northern Ireland, feminism, anti-racism – never featured in their interventions on the JSSC.

This may have reflected a wider tendency in IS industrial activism, where workers in industry were recruited largely on the basis of their militancy around wages and working conditions, with their expertise then being used to provide insight for a range of workplace-focused propaganda.<sup>47</sup> At Stoke this took the form of using their Chrysler members to write and distribute a two-sided A4 workplace bulletin, to contribute to and sell *Socialist Worker* and *Car Worker* inside the factory, and occasionally to lead public meetings aimed at car workers.<sup>48</sup>

The principle focus of this propaganda was about taking factory problems and placing them in the context of a wider struggle for power between workers and bosses, as a way of politicising everyday life. The bulletin produced by their Longbridge cell in October 1971 is a good example of this. Its four articles discussed a dispute over piecework prices in a machine shop, the possibility of an agreement over MDW in the sewing shop, the transfer of 300 workers between British Leyland's Drews Lane (Birmingham) and Castle Bromwich factories, and finally an article about the Common Market.<sup>49</sup>

In the first three articles disputes were described in detail then linked to longer-term ramifications. Thus the machinists were fighting not just for a raise but 'to defend the piecework system' and their cause was therefore 'crucial to all Austin piecework sections'. The sewing room were fighting not only MDW but the replacement of sewing 'with new material welding process[es] which [we]re cheaper and quicker' and that would bring

redundancies.<sup>50</sup> In the case of the Drews Lane workers, the bulletin noted that applicants were being refused transfers for poor discipline or lax timekeeping, despite the company's assurances otherwise. For Longbridge IS it was 'safe to bet that any ... worker with a record of militancy on the shop-floor' was likely to be struck off the list. It was therefore the workers' duty to defend good trade unionists.<sup>51</sup>

Only the final article, on the Common Market, took up a more abstract theme. This was wholly typical of IS bulletins, which looked first and foremost to provoke thought on the politics in factory struggles and only turned to wider ideas as an afterthought. Despite being limiting in many ways, this method of politicising workers had the advantage of building on the world of work that they knew to be directly relevant to their audience, as well as enabling IS activists to contribute to JSSC debates with convincing arguments and detailed information. Examining the papers and literature produced by the IS in this period, we see some of the utility of joining to men like Gerry Jones and John Worth. Having already formed strong views on issues like productivity bargaining, and with their own critique of the factory leadership's inertia, the IS gave access to resources, and to a network of activists that valorised their ideas and offered to help spread them.

### The workshop

The IS recruited conventional trade union militants with experience and an existing support base, then used them to articulate the connections they saw between everyday issues and wider political power. However, Worth and his comrades were careful in JSSC meetings not to push overtly 'political' positions too far and it seems likely that they were similarly cautious within the workshop, where ongoing support was needed to remain as a shop steward.<sup>52</sup> While becoming a shop steward was often easy – most elections were uncontested<sup>53</sup> – retaining support could be difficult, particularly for anyone identified as 'politically motivated'. In his department (engine test) Worth seems to have managed to win more than just passive acceptance, with his section often at the forefront of conflict within the factory. From December 1969 in engine test, along with 85 engine assembly line where Gerry Jones worked, there were regular militants, launching collective action over lay-off pay, movement of labour and working conditions, as well as raising questions over health and safety, canteen food and night shift hours.<sup>54</sup>

Their level of activity is an indication of Worth and Jones' influence, something further illustrated when Worth and three other stewards were sacked in November 1972. Asked by management to renegotiate the work standards in the engine test department, a disagreement with management unfolded, with the stewards refusing to hold a meeting at the industrial

relations' officer's preferred time. Worth was dismissed for being uncooperative and management, likely motivated by awareness of his (well-known) politics, compiled a twenty-two-page dossier outlining Worth's various crimes, dominated by accounts of case work he'd done for fellow workers and management impositions to which he had organised opposition.<sup>55</sup>

Within the workshop this kind of patient activism had helped build a genuine rapport with his workgroup, and the response to the sacking was rapid. His section walked out and within an hour had spread their protest to several other sections. Prompted by this wildcat action, the JSSC agreed to call for an all-out strike.<sup>56</sup> The resulting mass walkout continued for several days, until Worth won reinstatement. It was not, however, a complete victory. An agreement was reached where Worth would return to work but would no longer be recognised as a shop steward, pending an AUEW disciplinary into his conduct.

The next full JSSC meeting exposed the divisions that led to such an outcome. The remaining three engine test stewards raised Worth's case and were told tersely that 'they [would] be the first to know' of any development regarding his credentials.<sup>57</sup> For his colleagues Worth had been a co-worker since 1961, long before he'd been attracted to the IS.<sup>58</sup> They had known him personally and had direct experience of his trade unionism. They had seen him take risks to support them as individuals and collectively, actively participating in the decision making that lay behind the shop's conflicts. Worth was known and trusted, regardless of his politics. For the convenors, however, Worth represented a section that consistently caused trouble, had contact with an 'outside' political group and also regularly questioned the factory leadership. For some, this meant that while they would defend his job on principal, Worth personally was another question.

### **The end of Brother Worth**

Possibly wary of pushing this fragile JSSC solidarity, Worth accepted his lesser punishment and returned to work, before facing his union's own disciplinary process. The AUEW district committee investigated the company's accusations that Worth desired 'the destruction of the company' and was endangering efforts to 're-establish a relationship within the Stoke plant in which consultation and negotiation [could] be conducted in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect'.<sup>59</sup> The *Socialist Worker's* report of the meeting describes Ray Wild and JSSC chair Duncan Simpson condemning Worth for, among other things, participating in a 'teach-in on workers' control'.<sup>60</sup> In a relatively right-wing district of the AUEW, such accusations carried some weight and the committee finally agreed to strip his steward credentials.

The intervention of Simpson and Wild, the senior stewards, reflected the ambivalent attitude of the senior stewards towards the IS. Increasingly they were seen as a problem, preventing the normal conduct of industrial relations through their 'political' understanding of militancy. Interviews in local newspapers show the senior stewards' growing frustration with the IS, particularly during a strike by Chrysler's electricians in 1973. ETU members walked out in August demanding pay equal to that of the company's toolmakers. For the convenors this was a disaster. Without the electricians, machine breakdowns rapidly halted production and the company used strike-breakers (contractors and lower-level managers) to restart the machines. The rest of the workforce then had to decide whether these machines were 'black' (boycotted on the grounds that they had been fixed by strike-breakers) or not. Using them would seriously damage relations between the general unions and the ETU, boycotting them would mean the company sending thousands of workers home without pay.

The discussion over the electricians' strike on the JSSC was tense. With the national leaders of the AUEW and TGWU ordering work to continue as normal, Bob Morris (the TGWU convenor) and Ray Wild proposed holding a mass meeting to give information, but without any recommendation on whether to work with the repaired machines. This was met with fury by many on the committee, including Paul O'Brien, a member of the IS from 1970, who stated that regardless of the mass meeting 'he would not cross a picket line and would try to persuade his members not to'. He proposed that the stewards instead reiterate to the members their 'stand on not touching black work'. O'Brien's amendment lost (49 to 41), with the stewards voting to 'leave it up to the members to decide'.<sup>61</sup>

The mass meeting proceeded exactly as both sides had expected. With no recommendation from the platform and instructions from their unions to resume work, the members voted against blacking the machines. At the following JSSC meetings, the issue continued to be divisive. One steward declared himself 'disgusted at the decision on the green [during the mass meeting]' and reaffirmed his refusal to 'cross picket lines'. A month later, a further argument broke out when one steward called the chair 'a scab' and refused to accept the decision made by 'the scum on the green'. This provoked a further backlash, with one steward proposing that anyone defying a democratic decision made in a mass meeting be banned from the JSSC for five years (a resolution defeated 21 to 74).<sup>62</sup>

The IS were at the heart of this divide, identified as the main political force supporting the electricians. It was the IS to whom Bill Lapworth, District Secretary of the TGWU, referred, when he told a local newspaper that 'the vast majority [of car workers] are reasonable people who merely want to do a day's work with the minimum interference. They normally

deal with any factions who are disruptive for disruption's sake.<sup>63</sup> Lapworth opposed the electricians' strike, a view expressed by numerous workers interviewed by the newspapers, who complained about constant strikes costing them money, one saying: 'You get behind with rent, possibly hire purchase payments, and it has meant a change in my holiday plans. It can get that you are frightened of a knock on the door.'<sup>64</sup> The newspapers sought out such opinions, but, given the opposition to the strike expressed at the August mass meeting, it seems unlikely they had to look very far. Stoke Aldermoor was, in any case, never the most strike-prone factory in the industry.

Antipathy towards the electricians and their supporters was also substantial among the shop stewards. For the IS, this new hostility amplified the long-standing tension between them and the less radical JSSC majority.<sup>65</sup> As IS members themselves had sometimes boasted, their version of trade union values was a source of irritation to the senior stewards. Worth noted at a Coventry IS branch meeting as early as December 1971 that the growing credibility of the IS within the factory at that point had the 'right wingers getting very worried'.<sup>66</sup> In May 1972, the right wingers (the factory leadership) were further disturbed, as two IS members – Worth and Jones – won election to the Negotiating Committee for the annual pay round. Once there, they 'rejected any secrecy in negotiations. This ... led them to be attacked but they ... held their own.'<sup>67</sup> As with the electricians, the IS activists' conception of industrial relations, as an inherently political class struggle in which principles were always at stake, discomforted those who sought a more pragmatic approach.

In 1974, management finally rid themselves of Worth. In February, he was briefly suspended for an 'aggressive and threatening attitude towards a foreman'.<sup>68</sup> Three months later, he and one other operator, having completed their quota of operations for the day, stopped work early. Although this was a common practice in many car factories in this period, stopping without permission was technically a disciplinary offence, and Worth was approached by a foreman and subsequently 'taken off the clock' (suspended), then fired.<sup>69</sup>

His section again stopped work, demanding an enquiry. However, the factory leadership were less forthright. At the next meeting, JSSC chair Duncan Simpson, clearly more concerned about disruption to production, simply asked if Worth's section would resume work if his punishment were reduced to a suspension. The meeting then moved on to other business. Then, after a two-week hiatus, the stewards finally conducted a discussion of 'the merits of Brother Worth', which the minutes reported as 'a full debate in which many stewards spoke for and against'. The stewards then voted on a resolution: whether to recommend a strike to the next mass meeting if the company didn't offer an enquiry or whether to just 'tell the members the facts and ask them to make a decision'.<sup>70</sup> In the end Worth was granted an

enquiry and no strike materialised, eventually being dismissed when it found against him.<sup>71</sup>

### The meaning of Brother Worth

Worth's fate tells us a great deal about the individual and collective agency that workplace organisation offered at the height of post-war trade unionism, and the ways in which it shaped individuals' politics. Workplace activism, because it was a sphere in which workers participated directly in the construction of collective social power, offered opportunities for individuals to express their ideals in ways that had direct material effects. The de-centralised nature of workshop organisation meant that radicals could demonstrate the efficacy of their politics in practical terms by helping to rectify material grievances. They could also use small workgroup meetings and ordinary socialising to talk through ideas and win the trust of co-workers.

In the mid-1960s the reach of this agency was limited by the state of organisation within the factory, which mitigated against the transmission of radical demands from the workshop to the JSSC. Although activists could convince co-workers of particular policies, the way in which factory organisation worked in terms of space and representation made it difficult to approach workers outside their department, except indirectly through their shop stewards. Although this hamstrung efforts to engender broader political activity, it also had advantages. Within the workshop, the nature of a far-left activist's political affiliation was less important than their personal contribution to workplace life.

Later, as the JSSC became more dynamic it also became a site for *political* action, a place where different factions staked out *political* positions. However, as the firm's successful victimisation of Worth illustrates, the social practices and cultural norms of workplace activism placed clear limits on the ways in which far-left activists could operate in this context. On the JSSC, Worth and his comrades kept their interventions to conventional 'industrial issues' because these were the established norms for that context, meaning their activism focused mostly on direct economic problems.<sup>72</sup> Although what constituted an 'industrial issue' was broader than is often imagined, it did not extend to the kind of questions that drove the IS, with their interests in global revolution and workers' control. In the end, the narrowness of the cultural norms as to what counted as 'industrial' and what 'political' meant that even the self-discipline exercised by Worth was insufficient and his militancy over conventional issues gave his fellow stewards cause to weigh his 'merit' as a shop steward.

The troubles of the IS pose questions about the ways in which factory politics facilitated worker social power more broadly. Workplace trade

unionism allowed for two major types of interaction. Firstly: the interaction between shop stewards on the JSSC bringing their mandates from members and their personal opinions, then returning to 'report back' to their workgroup. Secondly: more quotidian discussions in the workshop, between workers and stewards, through case work, grievance resolution and shop meetings. Relations between ordinary stewards and workers outside their department were more constrained. Only at factory-wide mass meetings did the entire workforce take decisions together and even then the format prevented meaningful discussion. Meetings began with a question set by the factory leadership, who argued in favour of the collective position agreed by the JSSC. Members were restricted to voting for or against the recommendation from the platform.

Thus for the IS cell, their minority status and the closed nature of decision making meant that arguments won on the JSSC did not always translate into a wider transformation in consciousness, an issue that may have hurt their attempts to save Worth's job. It is notable, for instance, that while Worth's own section struck on his behalf, the JSSC was more reluctant to defend him, making it difficult to put his case to the membership. The precarious influence of the IS within the factory was heavily dependent on the 'merits' of individuals, and limited to certain sections and some of the JSSC. Such fractions were relatively easily weakened, and the party's culture outside the factory was perhaps unhelpful in retaining these activists outside of the factory context. The branch minutes for Coventry IS featured regular complaints about the inability of the group's 'students and intellectuals' to properly integrate manual workers.<sup>73</sup> In August 1972, Andy Enever, another Chrysler worker, noted the 'academic atmosphere' in Coventry IS, the 'sensation that the people talking couldn't organise anything' and that many workers felt like 'aliens'<sup>74</sup> – an unappealing prospect to industrial activists used to a sense of collective power.

This divide likely intensified after Coventry IS' members in their Chrysler, British Leyland and GEC industrial cells formed separate factory branches in 1973. Offering a report for the automotive fraction that year, the one shop steward not to leave the main branch, Ken Hulme, bemoaned the 'appalling social composition' of the rump Coventry IS, complaining at the predominance of 'ex-students' and calling for 'a determined effort ... to get sleeping industrial members into action since the fault here often lies with the branch not the members. Non-active ex-students will be getting the order of the boot.'<sup>75</sup>

Nevertheless, for all their problems, the Stoke IS branch could point to a real legacy of their activities. After Worth's sacking, the IS maintained a presence, with Gerry Jones continuing to work closely with Paul and George O'Brien (both themselves sacked in 1978).<sup>76</sup> For better or worse, the basic



dynamic on the shop stewards' committee that the IS had helped establish continued, with relatively open debates continuing to rage on a body that was more vibrant democratically than equivalents at most other factories. The price for such dynamism seems to have been a pronounced division between left and right, a mutual hostility that stayed with TGWU convenor Bob Morris, who remarked in 1975 that he still 'had a phobia about the Left'.<sup>77</sup>

In October that year, after several years of poor economic performance, Chrysler announced that their UK subsidiary was in major difficulties.<sup>78</sup> Workers at Stoke and Linwood (themselves led by ex-ISer John Carty) began preparations to occupy their factories, calling for the government to guarantee their jobs.<sup>79</sup> The stewards' assertiveness contributed to the eventual decision to save both plants, and related in part to changes in workplace trade unionism that the IS played a part in. Moreover, it was the left-wing minority on the Stoke JSSC that had first raised the possibility of occupying the plant, the previous April.<sup>80</sup>

### Conclusion

Looking at the experiences of far-left activists in the context of the factory rather than the party holds several advantages for historians. The continuous experiences of activists, including their pre-party lives, help us move beyond histories of political activism, which take the 'outsider' status of self-consciously politicised activists for granted. In the case of Worth and many other political radicals, their turn towards politics reflected not an 'otherness' but a search for ideas that explained commonplace experiences.

Worker activists were largely at home in the factory, rather than emissaries of an alien ideology and their experiences help illuminate important aspects of workplace life. The social power that workers wielded through their unions is central to understanding many workplaces in this period and to understanding working-class agency in post-war Britain more generally. The experiences of politicised workers help to demonstrate the uses to which this social power could be put by individuals motivated by wider concerns, revealing its possibilities and limitations.

The attractiveness of the politics of the IS to some also reveal a little of what issues militant factory workers hoped to solve through their activism, with problems like pressure for increased productivity, wage restraint and trade union bureaucracy both in and out of the factory prominent. The workplace was a sphere in which individuals with unconventional politics could make a real impact by using their ideology to inform interventions at workshop and factory meetings. The particular habitus in which Worth found himself made it a realistic place for him and his comrades to apply



the ideas of the IS regarding rank-and-file activism to noticeable effect. However, that impact was also constrained by the need to remain within the cultural norms of the workplace, and to work through social practices as they existed at the time. As Worth discovered to his cost between 1972 and 1974, attempting to 'politicise' everyday life at the factory could be alienating to other activists with narrower ideas about the uses of trade unionism. The reception of IS members thus reveals how workplace cultures set the limits of what factory organisations could and could not be used for.

## Notes

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- 11 S. Tolliday, 'High Tide and After: Coventry's Engineering Workers and Shopfloor Bargaining, 1945–80', in B. Lancaster and T. Mason (eds), *Life and Labour in a Twentieth Century City: The Experience of Coventry* (Coventry: Cryfield, 1986), pp. 204–39, pp. 215–16.
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## Making miners militant?

### The Communist Party of Great Britain in the National Union of Mineworkers, 1956–85

*Sheryl Bernadette Buckley*

#### The end

The year is 1991 and, sat in a dismal-looking canteen chatting over their sausage and chips, the three old ladies would not have looked out of place in the local bingo hall. Their topic of conversation, however, was a wistful depiction of a somewhat idealised form of socialism that had propelled the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) through its formative years and had sustained it, at least in part, through subsequent periods of strife. But fanciful optimism had run its course; the ladies were, somewhat dutifully, delegates to the party's 43rd Congress and were taking a brief hiatus from discussing what, if anything, was salvageable from the shipwreck of British communism. The CPGB's 43rd Congress, unlike its forty-two predecessors, was not looking forward to the future; instead, it was planning the end of the party. This was a most contentious affair; contextualised between the relatively recent fall of Soviet communism and the CPGB's own internal strategic and ideological differences, differences that largely emanated from debates around the CPGB's industrial strategy, ironically the very vehicle that the party thought would allow it to achieve its goals.

How had the Communist Party, formed in the wake of the Russian Revolution and designed to bring socialism to British shores, found itself so marginalised within Britain's political milieu. How had it become so internally divided? And how, perhaps most ironically, had it allowed all this to be played out in a documentary filmed by the very capitalist media that it had perennially criticised? This chapter considers the CPGB's industrial strategy, its genesis and the particular challenges presented in a British context. It then moves on to consider how this strategy was contextualised by the CPGB's relationship with the Labour Party and how the National Union of

Mineworkers (NUM) was perceived to be significant in the party's broader industrial and, ultimately, political ambitions. The miners' union is a good example of this due to the presence of communists in the industry, which grew over our period, the post-war optimism around nationalisation, and the change of fortune as mass unemployment arose. The NUM is also interesting due to the paradox of a high volume of unofficial strikes in relation to official action, and the sense that the miners' union was ultimately the most obvious victim of capitalism. The chapter explores the fundamental difficulties and weaknesses in the CPGB's industrial strategy, before considering how the party found itself at the 43rd Congress. All this then leads to an overall appraisal of the question as to why, in relation to the CPGB's industrial strategy, there was a perennial wait for the revolution. In order to be able to answer this question, it is necessary to understand the history of the CPGB, its industrial politics and the miners' union.

### **Building British Bolsheviks**

At least superficially, the picture had not always been so bleak and, in terms of its industrial strategy, the CPGB was often perceived to be ubiquitous and, indeed, nefarious. The strategy itself was simple, and can be dated to 1947–48, the onset of the Cold War being more than a coincidence in the party's thinking. It asserted that the rank and file of significant and numerically strong unions should be politicised through a steady and sustained campaign around 'bread and butter issues'.<sup>1</sup> This element, of course, had a clear genesis from Lenin, who had used 'exposure literature' to assist with the 'widespread development and consolidation' of the Russian workers.<sup>2</sup> In Britain, wage militancy was the vehicle through which the CPGB felt politicisation should be achieved. Wage militancy had economic and ideological functions, with the CPGB believing that it could act as a 'countervailing force to the inbuilt recessionary tendencies of a capitalist economy'.<sup>3</sup> This perception was compounded by successive post-war governments' commitment to wage restraint, first used by Labour in 1948, and driven by the belief that higher wages caused inflation. This perception was held by Anthony Eden's government and even the Trades Union Congress.

Meanwhile, at the top of unions that carried a large volume of the block vote at the Labour Party's annual conference, the CPGB envisaged filling the leadership with party members.<sup>4</sup> These individuals would, of course, propagate and pursue militant wage claims, which would assist with the politicisation of the union rank and file. The plan to secure influence across the upper echelons of the unions was necessitated because the party calculated that it would only be possible to get 'progressive' policies onto Labour's agenda if unsympathetic leaders were replaced by communists.<sup>5</sup> Previous

CPGB attempts to address this issue, including entryism and affiliation with Labour, had failed dismally. Eventually, the CPGB hoped, it could engage in some sort of progressive relationship with Labour; this was required because Labour already had a 'unique structural link' with the unions.<sup>6</sup> Although the party adopted Lenin's disparaging view that Labour was inherently 'reformist', it did see scope for potential.<sup>7</sup>

### **The CPGB and the National Union of Mineworkers**

The CPGB believed that one of the unions with the most potential was the NUM, a product of the post-war nationalisation of the mines. By definition, the conditions that miners worked in created the ideal breeding ground for the sort of politicisation that the CPGB hoped to achieve. This, naturally, gave rise to a healthy number of communists being already situated in the industry and active in the various localised federations. The lockout of 1926, and resultant General Strike, had best proved the industry's potential for mass militancy.<sup>8</sup> Even when the much-anticipated goal of nationalisation was secured in 1947, discontent in the industry did not wane, and day-to-day conditions in the industry did not much change. This caused a prevalence of unofficial strikes across the industry; in Scotland there were 374 unofficial strikes between April 1947 and April 1948.<sup>9</sup> Like similar strikes across the country, which would pepper the nationalised industry's first two decades, these outbursts of militancy were largely in response to the industry's chaotic and disparate pay structure, and so lacked any genuine national unification.<sup>10</sup> But all of these observations fed into the CPGB's belief that the miners might assist them in their broader political ambitions. Arthur Horner, the union's communist General Secretary, could observe the miners' 'high political consciousness'.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Labour Party and the CPGB in the post-war period**

Despite the potential, there was work to be done. The CPGB was initially an advocate of Clement Attlee's post-war Labour government, imaging a role for itself in British politics 'alongside the Labour Party', meaning communists in the union and in the party found themselves instep.<sup>12</sup> Both groups understood that keeping the mines productive was critical to Labour's post-war economic recovery plan, which had set itself the task of remediating the 16 million tonne shortage of coal in 1945.<sup>13</sup> The parity between communists in the union and the party itself resulted in communists acting as foremen in Labour's factory, not least as both groups initially wanted to see nationalisation succeed.

The onset of the Cold War caused the CPGB to rapidly change position, and the communists lost no opportunity to bemoan Labour's reformism and subservience to America's military capitalism.<sup>14</sup> Of course, given that the CPGB had at one point viewed Labour's move to government as a 'glorious political leap forward', the party had to deconstruct 1945 in a way that the CPGB could present itself as mislead rather than misguided.<sup>15</sup> The *Daily Worker*, the party's newspaper, noted in 1948 that 'Attlee swept to power in 1945 on the basis of socialist pledges, of promises of rising living standards, of lasting peace and friendship with Russia, he now stands as the betrayer of all these promises'.<sup>16</sup> But communists occupying significant positions within the union continued to support the Labour government and five months after the *Daily Worker* published Attlee's apparent treachery Sammy Moore, a communist in the industry, told the NUM's annual conference that unofficial strikes threatened to place 'the life of the Labour Government in jeopardy'.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the clear problem with party members in the union continuing to support a government that was an enemy of Russia, and despite the fact that the CPGB had most vehemently and repeatedly condemned this government, there was no sense of conflict between these two groups. This was largely because the CPGB had long-since realised that a didactic, dictatorial approach towards trade unionists who shared their political conviction would fail. This conviction emanated from Russia, where the leadership had noted:

WHEN OUR PARTY MEMBERS BECOME TRADE UNION OFFICIALS THERE IS A TENDENCY TO SOMETIMES SAY: 'NOW THAT YOU ARE A COMMUNIST TRADE UNION OFFICIAL YOU MUST DO AS WE LAY DOWN, AND EVERY PART OF OUR POLCIY MUST BE PUT INTO OPERATION'. Comrades, this is an impossible attitude towards officials who are communists. We must not put the comrades in an impossible position. This attitude will lose influence for the party.<sup>18</sup>

### **The 1960s: unemployment, wages and elections**

However, the latitude permitted between the party and its trade unionists in various industries meant that the CPGB would not 'force' its members to choose their job or their party, which may potentially have meant the CPGB would lose credibility, influence and members. The dynamic between communists in the union and those in the party is clear from looking at the minutes of the NUM's annual conference. Communists in the union often presented wage claims: for example, at the 1956 NUM annual conference, Will Paynter, a leading communist from South Wales, moved composite resolutions 22 and 23, seconded by Kent, another communist-led area, in order to authorise the executive to 'claim increased wages to offset any



worsening of real wages'.<sup>19</sup> The problem was that it was hard to differentiate between wage militancy and trade unionists pursuing better pay for their members; or, quite simply, doing the job that they had been elected for. As such, these 'militant' wage policies were often supported by non-communists. In 1960, for example, Les Ellis, a communist from the moderate Nottinghamshire coalfield, presented a wage increase that was supported by the Labour Party's Dennis Skinner, who suggested that the union should 'use every weapon at our disposal' to secure it.<sup>20</sup>

This dynamic had been complex even in the context of a post-war coal shortage, but when oil began to threaten coal's primacy, the impact of the CPGB's industrial strategy was further diluted. Between 1956 and 1957, the industry's profits fell by some £5 million.<sup>21</sup> The result of this was unemployment and between 1958 and 1961, 130,000 men lost their jobs.<sup>22</sup> Naturally, keeping men in work became a primary concern for union officials of any political perspective. This meant that even prominent communists, like Paynter, were often reticent to pursue wage claims when they deemed that the situation in the industry was too precarious. As he told delegates to the 1964 annual conference, the union could only extract so much money from the National Coal Board (NCB), and there was little that could be done about it.<sup>23</sup> Paynter understood that wage militancy would 'place the security and employment of men at risk for the sake of a few shillings' and would cause fear in the pits that such action would precipitate closures.<sup>24</sup>

However, not all communists in the union thought this way and, faced with a lack of direction from the CPGB, disunity between party members in the union was not uncommon. Between 1958 and 1964, for example, the NUM consistently accepted wage increases that were significantly lower than requested. In 1964, the union held a special conference where Paynter reported how the NCB offered a rise of 8s 10d a week, although 15s had been requested: Jack Collins, a communist from the Kent coalfield, wanted to fight for more money, like the union's executive did. It was Paynter, however, who later told the union that 11s had been accepted because 'it represented the climate'; Paynter was also instrumental in persuading other communists, like Cliff True from South Wales, not to reject the offer.<sup>25</sup>

The view from the party suggested confidence in the same strategy that it had rolled out in the context of a labour shortage; in fact, the CPGB continued to bemoan wage restraint and present wage militancy as the solution, as expressed in the 1962 publication, *For a Militant Wages' Policy*. This criticised wage restraint as responsible for slowing down the British economy, making prices rise, and imposing pressure on trade unions to restrict wages; the solution, it suggested, was a willingness to use 'solidarity action' at unprecedented levels.<sup>26</sup> The party's 28th congress in 1964 cemented

their commitment to the economic analysis that had justified wage militancy as the answer, calling for incomes policies to be stopped and wages increased.<sup>27</sup>

It was not that nobody noticed the problem: the failings of wage militancy, both generally and within the NUM, had been noted by astute observers. Oddly, the CPGB appeared to notice that this success had failed to translate into 'a comparable political advance in mass consciousness'.<sup>28</sup> But this observation was not linked to any attempt to remediate the problem, although potential alternatives were offered. Bill Warren of the CPGB's economic committee noted that 'the main revolutionary party of the working class is wielding a very limited direct political influence'.<sup>29</sup> Warren noted how the CPGB needed to 'develop a policy on inflation, not just wages'.<sup>30</sup> John Hughes of Ruskin College published his *Notes and the Position and Work of the NUM*; the fact that this document was found in the CPGB's archives suggests at least somebody in the party bothered to read it. Hughes' comments were similar to Warren's, in that he noted 'the utter inadequacy of money wage militancy', largely ground in the economic context, namely the development of oil as an alternative power source to coal, which would 'seriously impair the bargaining position of the NUM'.<sup>31</sup>

Part of the problem was that the CPGB could not retract its commitment to wage militancy; as J. R. Campbell, one of the party's most eminent writers, noted in 1966: 'if we raise a clamour for an incomes policy, we are in effect raising a clamour for disciplining the unions'.<sup>32</sup> This would be entirely embarrassing for a party that considered itself Leninist and, as such, had modelled its approach on Leninism. Instead the CPGB could, with some credible justification, look to the presence of its members across the higher echelons of the NUM (and other unions) as evidence of its success, thus ignoring the reality of having to reassess the entire premise of its industrial strategy. This was partly inflamed by the development of the 'broad left' strategy, a strategy where the CPGB actively encouraged party trade unionists to work with anybody with a similar outlook, usually individuals drawn from the Labour left. It is easy to see why the CPGB was intoxicated by the presence of communists and their allies across the top of the union; weak elsewhere, in the sense that it was haemorrhaging members and was politically marginalised, the façade of strength, derived from the numerical presence of the party, was a tempting illusion.

The extent to which this numerical presence benefitted the party is negligible. The extent to which the party drove this is also arguable. While the party appreciated the potential problem of driving party members in union positions into alienation, it also understood the problems with its involvement in union elections. John Gollan, the CPGB's General Secretary, noted that 'the party does not discuss or pronounce on the internal affairs

of the union election ... if the members of the union get together in any way by themselves or with others to promote candidates, that is their business, not ours'.<sup>33</sup>

The lack of coordination from the party core was evidence in 1960 when the NUM's president, Alwyn Machen, died suddenly, facilitating the need for another election. When Machen had won the first election, no communist had stood; but in the second election, numerous communist candidates stood. The NUM had a transferrable vote system in which voters could mark their preferences numerically, and those with the lowest ranking were gradually eliminated. This meant that in the first round of the vote, communist Alex Moffat was 23,000 votes in front of non-communist Sid Ford; but Les Ellis, another communist, had his 102,000 votes split between Moffat and Ford, meaning that Ford won with a 9,981 vote majority.<sup>34</sup> This disorganisation cannot be attributed to the inherent and innate factionalism of the industry, for it did not just occur at national level. In 1961, the year after the disastrous presidential election, the Yorkshire area needed a new vice president. This was an area to which the party had dedicated a full-time organiser, Frank Watters, and which was deemed critical to the overall strategy. This time two communists, Sammy Taylor and Jock Kane, stood and split the left's vote, causing a non-communist to win.<sup>35</sup>

### **Miners on the offensive**

So if the party core, seemingly the custodians of the industrial strategy, did not arbitrate in union wage negotiations, and if it did not drive elections, what did it do? It spent much of its time intoxicated by the growth of industrial militancy that began to sweep across many unions from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The party mistook this as evidence of its own potency: in fact, these were political expressions against government wage restraint, unemployment and a push for better conditions. Nowhere was this change in the workers' mentality better evidenced than in the somewhat dormant NUM.

Paradoxically, despite being impeded by numerous unofficial strikes, the industry had been quite exceptional among its peers as it had not engaged in official strike action since 1926. But by 1969 miners' pay had fallen dramatically, thus causing a genuine impetus for higher wages at that year's annual conference; the second part of the wage resolution was a request for a shorter working day.<sup>36</sup> Within three days of the pro-strike ballot being returned in October 1969, the result of the NCB's failure to concede the claim, all of Yorkshire's seventy-six pits were out, along with four from Scotland, two from South Wales and one from the Midlands.<sup>37</sup> At its height, 43 per cent of the union was out, the most unified display of militancy in the NUM's recent history.<sup>38</sup>

The result was that the NCB conceded higher pay, if not a shorter working day; demonstratively, the strike set a precedent and just months later, at the union's 1970 conference, wages were the issue of the hour. Arthur Scargill, the former communist left-winger and erstwhile union president, was most vocal about the NCB's failure to agree to the new wage claim, noting that the resultant strike – if refused – would make 'last October look like a Sunday school picnic'.<sup>39</sup> Mick McGahey, of the CPGB, seconded the resolution.

This may have looked like the sort of organised communist/broad left militancy that the CPGB had endeavoured to achieve; but, in reality, even moderates who were not aligned with the left, for example Roy Ottey, supported it. Further evidence of this emerged when Emlyn Williams, himself active in the broad left and a miners' leader from South Wales, proposed resolution 12, which requested £1 a week less than the Scargill-led claim.<sup>40</sup> Williams reassured the delegates that his area meant no malice in pursuing the resolution; instead, Williams explained, the temper of the South Wales coalfield was such that they wanted him to present their individual claim in order to convey their agitation and frustration at the wages' situation.<sup>41</sup> It was Lawrence Daly, the former communist and broad left associate, along with the union's president, Joe Gormley, who opposed the resolution on the grounds of its divisiveness.<sup>42</sup> In the event, the resolution was narrowly passed by 169 votes to 160.<sup>43</sup> Whether this contributed to the strike ballot failing, with 55.5 per cent of the union in favour (when a two-thirds majority was needed), is debatable; what is clear, however, is that neither communists in the union nor the party appeared to challenge the division.

The NUM was clearly moving to the left and willing to protect its position in relation to these developments; but what was also notably clear was that the CPGB and its allies were not pioneers of this position. Broadly, the 1970s saw the Labour left and the CPGB develop the Alternative Economic Strategy, a gradual and progressive series of demands that would 'put the country on the road to socialism'.<sup>44</sup> In fact, even principles that the party itself had been fighting for since nationalisation, such as the adult rate for miners who turned eighteen, was finally presented in 1971 by the moderate Leicester area and no communist spoke in favour of it.<sup>45</sup> At the same conference wages were once again on the agenda; even if the party wanted to perceive wage militancy as apparent in the union, it was much more likely that this was a response to falling wages in the industry which, as Gormley agreed, the miners were no longer willing to tolerate.<sup>46</sup> The NCB's ability to yield to pressure in order to keep the industry running by granting higher pay was made impotent by the Prime Minister, Edward Heath's, phased incomes

policies, which capped wage increases at five per cent.<sup>47</sup> Embracing its new militancy, the union's resultant overtime ban saw an impressive 96 per cent of the union in favour and, by early 1972, 58.8 per cent of the union voted to go on strike, a result that would not have been possible under the pre-1971 two-thirds rule.

The 1972 national miners' strike has been covered elsewhere, and although there is scope to explore this again, a detailed study is outside the scope of this chapter. Here was an example of successful national wage militancy, which had popular support, in a union where the CPGB had a credible presence. The 1972 NUM annual conference, four months after the strike, continued to demonstrate the union's left-wing temper, in terms of the types of resolutions that were presented; but these resolutions were composited, and were not under the directive of communists and their allies, a trend that continued into 1973. It was also not a given that the type of militancy that existed in 1972 would transcend that year, and an attempt to get another strike going over wages in 1973 failed by 143,006 votes to 82,631, with even the more militant areas of the union failing to achieve a mandate.<sup>48</sup> Had 1972 proven the party's industrial strategy, then it would be expected that the miners might waste no time in trying to replicate their success against an anti-union Conservative government; the fact that this did not happen is further evidence of the true marginality of the CPGB, even in the industrial milieu. This reality was compounded by the fact that, despite the victory of 1972, there was no resultant benefit for the CPGB as might be measured in political growth and influence, inflated membership, etc.

The somewhat sporadic nature of the NUM's new-found militant temper demonstrated itself again in 1974, once more over wages and, once again, facing the Heath government. An overtime ban that commenced in October 1973 preceded the strike, and was compounded by Heath's imposition of a State of Emergency soon after; by 20 December McGahey and Daly met Willie Whitelaw, the Secretary of State, at Downing Street. No doubt the significance of a communist and former communist being permitted into the inner-sanctum of government served to heighten the party's sense of its own potency; but the men were there as union emissaries and there is no sense that the party had any influence over this meeting, nor that it attempted to gain this. The meeting was in vain, and the second national miners' strike in as many years commenced on 4 February 1974 with an unprecedented 81 per cent of the union supporting the mandate.<sup>49</sup> The strike was short-lived, ending on 10 March with a generous wage settlement and Heath's exit from Downing Street, the result of his risky 'who governs?' mandate; thus, a Labour government, peppered with ministers sympathetic to the left, quickly replaced him.<sup>50</sup>

**Strategy: debates and implosion**

Certainly the CPGB continued to have a presence across the top of the NUM; by the mid-1970s, the party could credibly boast that 'the solid left wing will have 11 of the 27 voting executive positions'.<sup>51</sup> The fact that the CPGB and their allies were embedded within the union was symptomatic of two main changes: that communists within the NUM were not distinguished by their political affiliation, and that even members of the Labour Party were willing to work with them. By definition, just as the CPGB perceived this as a measure of its acceptability within the British political milieu, it in fact served as a reminder of its own marginality. As we noted earlier, up until the late 1960s, the Labour Party had repeatedly averted the CPGB's attempts at friendship; the fact that the broad left existed demonstrated that the CPGB was no longer a threat to grassroots Labour members, and the Labour Party's official 1973 decision to lift its ban on communists further evidenced its position. But to link the NUM's recent militancy to a purely political position would be incorrect. The precarious position of many miners, in terms of increasing unemployment, compounded by their falling pay, married with a political awareness that challenged both the Wilson and Heath government's hostility towards trade unions, was the catalyst for this militancy.

The great problem for the CPGB was that, until such an episode of national militancy had come from the miners' union, advocates of party's traditional industrial politics could always speculate the effect that this type of unprecedented action would cause. Once it had happened, and there had been no tangible political benefit for the CPGB, it meant that there was scope to critique the existing strategy with more credibility. It is noteworthy that there were two different types of 'dissent' around the industrial strategy. The first was from, perhaps inadvertently, communist trade unionists themselves who, rather than actively opposing the party line, were permitted sufficient autonomy to simply occupy themselves with the ebb and flow of union life, and thus can be described as passive dissenters.

It was the second form of dissent that would, ultimately and eventually, cause the CPGB to implode; the genesis of this position can be traced back to Bill Warren, whose arguments we previously explored. More broadly, the Eurocommunist position was based around the sense that the struggle should no longer revolve around industrial intervention, but broader challenges of race, class and gender. Within the CPGB this Eurocommunist current originally emanated from the likes of Mike Prior and Dave Purdy, but its advocates continued to grow until there was a firm ideological divide within the already marginalised and small party; this was somewhat embarrassing for a party that structured itself on monolithic unity and democratic centralism. Although

much of the strategy still focused on the Labour Party there was a growing sense that, in its current form, there was little to gain from prosecuting the existing industrial strategy.

Betty Matthews, writing in the middle of the industry-wide militancy of the late 1960s and early 1970s, noted the weakness of the strategy in its existing form; there had been a failure to make political capital out of what was primarily a wages' struggle, which was the only way the right-wing balance in the Labour Party could be changed.<sup>52</sup> The broadening of the left's perspective from within the CPGB was not only the result of an introspective evaluation from some party members; 1956 had demonstrated that Marxism in Britain was not a monopoly of the CPGB, although the 'New Left' had mostly been confined to an intellectual elite, towards whom the CPGB traditionalists exhibited disdain. Into the 1970s, there was a growth of Trotskyist groups, particularly Militant Tendency and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP – the International Socialists pre-1977). While Militant had some success with 'entryism', Tony Cliff's SWP began to criticise the CPGB, claiming that 'even the most left of trade union officials is trapped by his environment'.<sup>53</sup> All of this collated itself to cause a serious ideological and strategic crisis within the CPGB, most publicly expedited during Granada's 'fly on the wall' documentary, *Decision British Communism* (1978), and geared towards the imposition of a 'broad democratic alliance'.<sup>54</sup>

The sense of change within the party was also evident when the party's two main publications, *The Morning Star* and *Marxism Today*, became polarised between traditional and modernising positions respectively. Stuart Hall had made an early observation, about the need to respond to the unprecedented nature of Thatcherism, in *Marxism Today* in 1979, but it was Eric Hobsbawn's lecture and publication in the same journal that caused the most controversy. Hobsbawn's 'The Forward March of Labour Halted' took the view that the labour movement was on the defensive, as opposed to the offensive, and that the working class was declining.<sup>55</sup> There needed, moreover, to be a broader fight outside of this shrinking group. These texts were significant tracts within a party that had given primacy to the working class as leaders of the struggle, and built an industrial politics on that basis. But within the NUM, and other key unions, there was no sense that the discourse around broadening the struggle was given any credibility by the CPGB, in much the same way that Hughes's earlier observations had been considered. The observations of Hall and Hobsbawn were made when Thatcherism was in its infancy, and before it had cemented its strength. But there is no sense that the traditional group of the CPGB attempted to consider these new arguments in relation to their work within the NUM.



**1984 and disunity**

By definition, communists within the union were bound to be involved in these discussions. The extent to which this impacted on their union duties was somewhat nominal, certainly until the 1984–85 miners' strike. The strike was notably different from the national strikes of the 1970s in that it was a stance against unemployment (particularly the closure of pits deemed 'uneconomic' by the NCB and government), as opposed to the pursuit of higher pay. The way that the state prepared itself, orchestrating an armoury of civil legislation to curtail the strike before it had even started, was also different.<sup>56</sup> This marked a move from the more congenial position of Thatcher's predecessors. 1984 was also different in that the union itself was divided, between those who supported the legitimacy of the strike being called on an area-by-area basis, and those who had wanted, but failed to get, a national ballot. During the strikes of the 1970s the CPGB had allowed itself to enjoy an at least superficial leadership role in the strike, imagining that it was leading a (successful) political battle. But by 1984, the CPGB's position had moved to reflect the *zeitgeist* of the party itself, which by this point was much aligned with the Eurocommunist group. As such Pete Carter, the CPGB's industrial organiser, imagined that the party could support the miners' fight against Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, an unprecedented enemy of trade unionism, by adopting a more auxiliary role, for example supporting rallies, leafleting and making posters; in short, propagating the miners' cause.<sup>57</sup>

In a sense, this tactic marginalised the CPGB to little more than a pressure group, although it did give the party a more credible day-to-day role. The alternative was that the CPGB aligned itself with the more syndicalist-inclined methodology of the union itself, most obviously associated with Scargill, Gormley's successor, and a tactic the party had never advocated. Despite the party's Eurocommunist position being the more sensible choice, it did little to stem the odour of decline that emanated from King Street, the CPGB's central hub, and it all smacked of too little, too late. The archives of the party during the strike are peppered with the optimistic recording of new members drawn from mining areas; but even with these new recruits, the CPGB continued to haemorrhage members, which outstripped what the party propagated as the 'growth' resulting from the miners' strike. As history has recorded, 1984 was one of the most embittered political strikes of the century and, as the CPGB had hypothesised, such a protracted strike should have had politicising consequences; but there was little growth to be had, further evidencing the extreme miscalculation of the original strategy. It was little wonder that the CPGB was unable to use the strike to arrest its own decline, let alone fulfil any sort of strategy, for the embittered divide between



the Eurocommunists, who favoured the sort of approach that Carter suggested, and the traditionalists, who found themselves somewhat reluctant fellow travellers of the Scargill-led syndicalist approach, became increasingly public.

It was in the Nottinghamshire area of the union where these divisions were most brutally played out; as is well documented, it was this area that was most reluctant to pursue strike action, leading to significant conflict with the main union and brutal clashes between miners and police. For communists in this area, the situation was even more difficult. As a letter from Jeff Staniforth, on behalf of the East Midlands district of the CPGB, to Carter noted, his area felt that they were being excluded from national party meetings and complained about a lack of political direction from the party.<sup>58</sup> As the strike rolled towards its first year anniversary, with no sign of the government yielding and with many miners having to return to work in the face of destitution, despair and divisions, there is evidence of a more overt critique of the NUM's strategy from within the union. George Bolton of the NUM Executive, and a CPGB member identified with the Eurocommunist position, had at the start of the strike been dismissive of the criticism around the lack of ballot.<sup>59</sup> The party itself criticised the union at an unprecedented level. Carter, while criticising the methodology of the strike, noted that it had failed to respond to the new style Thatcher-politics, which was indicative of a 'lack of political clarity on how to develop the class struggle'.<sup>60</sup>

Carter's pamphlet was leaked to the *Daily Mail* in May 1985. The headline, 'Top Communist Hits at Scargill' added that 'most of the Eurocommunists who dominate the party's leadership agree with his analysis'. The paper furthered that 'it provides embarrassing evidence of the wide rift between the Eurocommunists and the old guard party members'.<sup>61</sup> Rather than back Carter, the CPGB disassociated itself from the contents of the article, claiming that they had only asked Carter to prepare a document analysing the strike.<sup>62</sup> The infamous class struggle that the strike personified failed to create any political capital for the party; in fact, it simply served to inflame all the weaknesses that had existed within the CPGB's industrial politics since its inception.

### Waiting for the revolution?

The CPGB's primary purpose for its industrial strategy was to change the political position of the Labour Party in order to bring about the broader changes that the CPGB wanted to see across Britain. Certainly, as we have seen, the Labour Party did move to the left: evidence of this new position was demonstrated from programmatic change, for example through the party's support for the Alternative Economic Strategy, a transitional stage

in the path to socialism. The NUM also moved to the left, as we have seen, and this was clearly a consequence of the contextual pay and security facing the industry as Britain de-industrialised. The CPGB did not benefit from these developments; thus, the CPGB's industrial strategy must be described as a failure. One of the main problems was the reliance on wage militancy as a politicising vehicle. The fight for higher wages would always ensure that the people moving them would be popular; but the primary issue for many miners was their take-home pay, and not the political affiliation of the trade unionist pursuing the wage claim. Even McGahey noted that the miners' support for higher pay was not indicative of politicisation.<sup>63</sup> As such, the sort of wage resolutions that communists presented could be supported by their 'moderate' union colleagues; as such, communists in trade unions were not a threat and hence were electable, allowing them to be ubiquitous across the leadership of many unions, particularly the NUM. This also meant that, although it created the illusion of party influence in the union, there was nothing tangible to extract from this presence. In relation to wage militancy there was a difference between the CPGB's theory, largely based on the strategies that had worked in Russia, and the way it was applied in a British context in the miners' union. Unfortunately for the CPGB, by the time this was realised by the Eurocommunist grouping, it was too late.

This leads to a second issue with the CPGB's industrial strategy in the miners' union: the way the party structured itself in relation to its members within the NUM. This was because the party understood that it could not dictate a heavy political line to its members in industry. But it also meant that when it did consider a change of strategy, such as the Eurocommunist position, it was difficult to push into the union. Privately, it did concern itself with the progress of the strategy; various meetings of the party's industrial committee pondered the fate of its industrial standing. There is undoubtedly a wealth of dialogue that will never be uncovered by historians, for it was informal and undocumented, and so in some sense historians are forced to write a history of silence. But the evidence that we do have, of the party discussing industrial politics, is generally in numerical terms; for example quantifying how many party branches existed in certain areas, as opposed to considering particular challenges to the overall strategy, the type that were discussed by the likes of Bill Warren and John Hughes. The CPGB was always going to be in an impossible situation and it correctly understood that it was no expert in most of the industries in which it had a numerical presence, and so could not dictate to them. If it pushed party members, it stood the risk of causing those members to choose their jobs over their politics and, given the presence of communists across the top of the union, this would not have been in the party's favour.

Within the miners' union, the CPGB's industrial strategy effectively destroyed the party's good relationship with the miners, and contributed to

the party's implosion. Ironically, the party's strategy destroyed its own laboratory. In 1979 Jack Collins, a communist from Kent who would go on to leave the CPGB in 1983, pondered: 'why do people elect communists at work, but nowhere else?' Collins mused over the various possibilities, such as the fact that the party did not take full advantage of the potential to expand, for example not bothering to stand candidates in the 1979 general election. But this was not a new question: even in 1950, when the CPGB lost both of its elected MPs, the problem existed. The potential answer to Collin's question is not definitive but the evidence suggests that it is probably because of various factors. In the particular context of Britain and not Russia the CPGB, originally perceived to be subversive during the Cold War, was forced to compete with a Labour Party that had strong links to the working class. Voting for a communist trade unionist was not an endorsement for the party and communists were often good trade unionists who happened to be communists. While these men were never secretive about their politics, there was never a reason to boast of them either. Their communism was an article of faith; at best it guided them in their union duties, but the party never drove their actions.

The CPGB could not have structured the situation differently, though. If it had been dictatorial to its union members in industry, and pushed them to choose their party or their union position, the CPGB knew which one would have won. The reason why people elected communists in the workplace but did not support the party was because they were not perceived as synonymous. There was an ability for miners to separate, even subconsciously, their local communist mining trade unionist from the communists that were found in the Soviet Union. This was advantageous to the party in the short term, in the sense that it allowed the party to maintain the illusion of influence, even during the hostilities of the Cold War. During this period, there was an awareness of British communism's link to the Soviet Union, but union officials were able to withstand this, even advancing their positions. Jock Kane recalls the hostility that he, 'Kane the Red', faced during his successful campaign to be Barnsley's compensation agent, where he was told by an NCB area official that miners wanted him to resign from the CPGB, which he refused to do; when he confronted the men, it became apparent that the official had lied.<sup>64</sup> The willingness of miners to support communists, despite having no political parity, is exemplified in numerous instances across all levels of the union. For example in 1959, when Horner retired, even Sam Watson, a 'rabid anti-communist', recognised that Paynter would win the election, going as far as announcing this in front of Sid Ford, Paynter's rival, at a union executive dinner.<sup>65</sup> The fact that communists could be supported by those who had a different political perspective ensured that even when they left the CPGB, union duties could go on uninterrupted: Lawrence Daly and Arthur Scargill both exemplified this. As the CPGB allowed communist trade

unionists to give primacy to their union duties, it meant that miners who were not sympathetic to the party could almost ignore the politics of their communist trade unionist: this meant acceptability, but it also brought marginalisation.

In all of this, there was little that the party could have done differently. It was bound by the particular political and economic context of coal, and this was enveloped within a strategy that had a Russian genesis. The CPGB's strategy was particularly unfortunate, in that it was conceived in a period where the coal industry struggled with production, where higher wages might be extracted; the unforeseen shift, just a decade later, to mass unemployment undermined the entire project. But there was little that the CPGB could have done to change its fortunes. The difficulties that the CPGB faced were symptomatic of many small, fringe parties in British politics, frozen out by the dominant two-party cartel. Perhaps the CPGB's undeniable efforts and commitment to the cause may have been better invested in focusing on a fight to change the electoral system rather than trying to influence a Labour Party that not only monopolised the working class, but which also was part of the cartel that froze the CPGB out. In relation to the CPGB, the wait for the revolution was the result of the failings of the industrial strategy, across all unions but clearly demonstrated through the NUM. That implosion was most obvious within the NUM by 1985, and so it is no surprise that the three old ladies in 1991 were part of the committee tasked with winding up the optimism for a fairer society that had once been the foundation of the British Communist Party.

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## Networks of solidarity

### The London left and the 1984–85 miners' strike

*Diarmaid Kelliher*

In March 1984 the majority of British miners walked out on strike against the threat of widespread pit closures. Unlike the 1972 and 1974 coal disputes during the previous Conservative government, this was to be a lengthy and ultimately unsuccessful struggle, ending a year later with no agreement and the National Coal Board's Ian McGregor promising to teach miners 'the price of insubordination and insurrection'.<sup>1</sup> Although many miners and their families were undoubtedly focused on defending jobs and communities, the strike had a much wider political resonance. The dispute was perceived by some as a showdown between the Thatcher government and the labour movement and broader left.<sup>2</sup> The sense that the miners had a 'very special place in the British Labour movement', and since the early 1970s in particular could be portrayed as something like a vanguard, explained in part why the strike became a focus for so many.<sup>3</sup>

This appeal was broad. London-based Trinidadian activist and writer John La Rose argued that 'no single battle of the working class and people in Britain has aroused so much passion and attracted so much solidarity from black workers and unemployed[sic] ... What has struck us and won our admiration has been the courage, determination and heroism of the miners and their families, especially the women in their organisations'.<sup>4</sup> Around the dispute developed a large and diverse support movement both within and beyond the coalfields. Compared to the 1970s miners' strikes, secondary industrial action by other trade unionists was relatively sparse and ineffectual. Nevertheless, the ability to sustain the strike for a year relied partly on the mass fundraising efforts of the large support networks.

This chapter focuses on the role of London's radical left in this solidarity campaign. As Jonathan Saunders noted, far-left organisations produced 'mountains of literature' on the strike, and 'each organisation had its own



particular slogan or formula' that they believed was the key to victory.<sup>5</sup> I mostly avoid these debates. Instead, I emphasise how activists constructed networks of solidarity between London and the coalfields. By discussing feminist, black, and lesbian and gay support groups, I highlight how the miners' industrial struggle resonated and was politicised in diverse ways. I argue that this support contested the boundaries of class politics and the radical left, reflecting a broader period of flux and realignment. The divisions and weaknesses of the radical left prevented it from independently developing mass action that could have had a decisive impact on the strike. Nevertheless, I argue that this history helps us understand how solidarity can be constructed between diverse places and groups of people.

### Networks of solidarity

Solidarity networks between London and the coalfields could develop in relatively informal, small-scale ways through the connections of radical left activists. Anarchist miner Dave Douglass, for instance, noted that Beetham Miners' Support Group in Yorkshire was launched with support from Class War and the anarchist lesbian and gay group Wolverine in London.<sup>6</sup> Such connections could bring miners to London and shape their experiences in the capital. Norman Strike was a Durham miner who joined the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). In his diary he describes staying in Willesden Green on the settee of Chris Dean, a fellow SWP member and musician in the Redskins, while fundraising in London. Strike discusses how 'a London comrade took me to a DHSS office in Harrow and the workers there have agreed to support the kitchen, which is brilliant'. He 'spent the week visiting colleges and factories from Kilburn to Croydon'. Strike later moved from Dean's couch to stay with 'an SWP comrade' in Croydon who took him to speak to a large group of union stewards in a local factory.<sup>7</sup> A report by members of Brent Miners Support Group complaining that 'various fringe bodies have been involved in taking "their" miners to workplaces and meetings, collecting money' suggests that Strike's experience reflected a broader pattern.<sup>8</sup> This echoes Saunders' research on the international support movement, which notes how far-left organisations helped organise speaking and fundraising tours internationally when the official trade union movement limited their involvement to messages of support.<sup>9</sup> The newspapers and magazines of the radical left also helped connect supporters and mining areas by listing pits and food kitchens in need of help.<sup>10</sup>

The involvement of the Redskin's Chris Dean also highlights the contribution of musicians and countercultural currents more broadly. Countless fundraisers for the miners featuring alternative cabaret, music and theatre took place in London throughout the year of the strike.<sup>11</sup> Later in the dispute elements of



this milieu organised collectively as Pit Dragon. The *NME* described how the group had ‘harness[ed] the talents of almost every worthwhile artist on the seamier side of the London cabaret circuit and the potential exists to develop it into the most dynamic political/cultural organisation since Rock Against Racism’.<sup>12</sup> There were certainly threads connecting Rock Against Racism through Pit Dragon to Red Wedge later in the decade. As well as raising funds, Pit Dragon performed outside Neasden power station in north-west London, ‘bringing art and entertainment onto the picket line – where it belongs!’<sup>13</sup> The *NME* commented: ‘Scab lorries turned back by a variety show? Surely a first in the annals of industrial struggle.’<sup>14</sup>

The picket line was a key space in which solidarity could be enacted and diverse forms of politics could meet. Members of far-left organisations, along with others, also attempted to build support in their localities, taking the politics of the strike to people’s homes and workplaces. In Tottenham, north London, for example, the Communist Party (CP) carried out house to house food collections and the SWP’s Dave McKay was particularly active in visiting factories to build support.<sup>15</sup> The radical left also helped highlight the miners’ cause in London’s universities and polytechnics where staff and student supporters organised collections, held meetings and gave use of their facilities to miners.<sup>16</sup> The spaces in which people campaigned tended to reflect their politics. London feminists in Lambeth described taking women from South Wales to raise support in places that they believed ‘men couldn’t or wouldn’t go: refuges, single parents’ groups, one o’clock clubs, schools, community, youth and health centres’. One of the group commented that she ‘felt so excited sitting in a community centre listening to South London women enthusiastically discussing day to day life through the strike with women from pit villages’.<sup>17</sup>

Sections of the radical left clearly saw the strike as a vindication of a particular type of class politics. Tariq Ali argued that the involvement of women in the coalfields suggested a ‘happy marriage between feminism and industrial militancy’ that contradicted those ‘who were not long ago whispering in corridors and declaiming at dinner parties that “picketing was a form of machismo”, that the tactics of the Greenham women “showed the way forward” and were universally applicable, and that the miners were irredeemably wedded to a male-dominated view of the world’. The function of such arguments, Ali claimed, was to use feminism as a bridge away from working-class politics.<sup>18</sup> In fact, strong connections were made with the women of Greenham, which had originated in a march from South Wales.<sup>19</sup> Reciprocal visits between the Greenham Camp and the coalfields, and support from Greenham activists in London and elsewhere, feature frequently in accounts of the time.<sup>20</sup> This suggests a more complex meeting of different types of politics than Ali perceived.

Arguably Greenham women, including London-based supporters, developed the strongest connections with mining areas of any feminists partly due to a shared hostility to the nuclear industry.<sup>21</sup> There was, however, broad feminist activism in support of the strike, often inspired by the widespread and prominent involvement of coalfield women.<sup>22</sup> While it is understandable to represent the relationship between the coalfields and London in terms of 'working-class women and middle-class feminists'<sup>23</sup> – and certainly this forms part of the picture – the networks of support were more complex. The South East Region TUC (SERTUC) Women's Committee, for example, organised a meeting bringing together activists from Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC) and Greenham Common, but also women cleaners striking against pay cuts at Barking Hospital.<sup>24</sup> The hospital cleaners were joined on their picket line by miners, and women's groups from Kent and Wales continued the support after the miners' dispute. The solidarity was mutual: Barking workers joined miners' power station pickets and visited the Kent coalfield.<sup>25</sup> Another 'Women in Struggle' meeting in east London had speakers from the Derbyshire coalfield, the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, and a former Armagh Irish republican prisoner.<sup>26</sup> The miners' support campaign could therefore draw together national and international struggles, constructing what Brown and Yaffe have described as 'counter topographies of resistance'.<sup>27</sup>

While support groups constructed varying solidarity coalitions, there was a shared sense of the interconnection of different struggles, and arguably an early politics of intersectionality. Women activists supporting the miners engaged with class politics, feminism, sexuality and, as in the example above, national liberation struggles. Women from the Nottinghamshire coalfield visited Northern Ireland to show support for republican women in Armagh jail who were subject to strip searches.<sup>28</sup> The Troops Out Movement (TOM), an organisation formed in London in 1973 to campaign for British troops to leave Northern Ireland and for Irish self-determination, similarly organised visits of miners to Ireland.<sup>29</sup> Such solidarity networks moved beyond simply asserting connections to enable direct personal experiences of the issues being discussed. These meetings could be uncomfortable, however, especially as it was not unusual for miners to have family serving in the British army in Ireland. A Leicestershire miner taken to Belfast by TOM commented that it 'was awkward for me because my family was military – I'd got brothers in the army – but I thought I'd go over and see what it was all about'.<sup>30</sup> Others appeared less conflicted. A South Yorkshire miner who visited Belfast described 'talking to a soldier whose dad is a miner'. These working-class soldiers, he believed, were 'traitors to their class'.<sup>31</sup> These visits highlight the complex overlapping geographies evident during the strike: a campaign established in London taking miners from the British coalfields to visit Belfast.

Such connections found a distorted echo in Conservative attempts to represent the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) as an extremist threat comparable to the IRA. Attorney General Michael Havers reportedly suggested that ‘the IRA and Arthur Scargill are in a sense very similar’. While miners were not involved in killing or bombing, ‘Scargill and the IRA have one ambition in common – to bring down the accepted democratic system of government’.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps as a result, the comparison was not always welcomed on the left. A letter to *Socialist Worker* criticised repeated attempts by the paper to draw such links: ‘There is nothing in common between terrorists like the IRA and miners engaged in legitimate trade union activity.’<sup>33</sup> A meeting organised in London by Black Delegation to the Mining Communities (BDMC), with speakers from the coalfields, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Sinn Féin, was held in the Greater London Council’s (GLC) County Hall with the support of Ken Livingstone. Former Yorkshire miner Roy Mason, an NUM sponsored Labour MP for Barnsley and Northern Ireland Secretary in the 1970s, expressed himself ‘horrificed’ and claimed that the PLO and Sinn Féin were using Livingstone to undermine the strike.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast, TOM emphasised historical links between British miners and Ireland, including support from the Miners Federation of Great Britain during the 1913 Dublin lockout, and drew attention to the use in mining communities of police tactics developed in Northern Ireland. ‘It is a sad irony’, they argued, that some of the techniques being used against the miners were developed while Roy Mason ‘oversaw British rule in Northern Ireland in the late seventies during one of its most vicious phases’.<sup>35</sup> The idea that the state violence facing the miners could encourage mutual solidarity with other oppressed groups was a central argument for TOM, but also for a number of other groups including BDMC.

### Generative solidarity

BDMC was a coalition of radical black activist groups – including Southall Black Sisters, Camden Black Workers Group, Kings Cross Women’s Centre and the Southall Monitoring Group – that organised together to support the strike.<sup>36</sup> Pragna Patel, a member of Southall Black Sisters and BDMC, spoke to the Elvington Miners’ Wives Support Committee in Kent, telling them that she hoped ‘there would now be a more concrete unity between the Black and mining communities, based on their shared experiences of policing methods’.<sup>37</sup> Reflecting some years later, Patel again emphasised the importance of the militarised and politicised ‘police assault’ faced by miners, which ‘was similar to what black people had faced [...] in Brixton, in Southall, [...] and Northern Ireland for example’.<sup>38</sup> Similar arguments were made by John La Rose, who spoke at a miners’ solidarity meeting in

Hackney representing the Alliance of Black Parents Movement, the Black Youth Movement and the Race Today Collective, and donated money to the miners' appeal on behalf of the New Beacon Bookshop in Finsbury Park.<sup>39</sup> He argued in *Race Today* that during the strike 'the mineworkers learned what the black population have had to learn during 30 years of hard experience with the police and the courts. Some miners even said: We did not believe what you were saying about the police before but now we understand.'<sup>40</sup> Accounts from miners and their families themselves, at least those active in the strike, frequently attest to this shift in consciousness.<sup>41</sup>

Alongside these shared experience, it was the personal relationships developed through the solidarity networks that encouraged new ways of thinking. Patel explained that BDMC took coachloads of people and Indian food to the Kent coalfield: 'often the mining communities had never met or talked to Indian people or Asian people. And so there was a real camaraderie.' Although they were not 'necessarily all progressive on race issues [...] they were exposed to seeing black women on picket lines and at the mining communities at the coalface, you know, supporting them'.<sup>42</sup> However, the coalfields were not entirely white.<sup>43</sup> Black London feminist Gail Lewis described connections she developed with Asian women organising in Yorkshire through WAPC during the strike. This contrasted with the few contacts with white feminists she had outside of London.<sup>44</sup> BDMC also visited Nottinghamshire and campaigned jointly with black activists in the area from outside the coal industry. Together they visited Gedling Colliery, where there was a strong black presence, in an apparently unsuccessful attempt to convince non-strikers to join the dispute.<sup>45</sup>

Striking black miners also travelled to London, speaking at meetings and raising funds at a number of events.<sup>46</sup> Most notably, black miners worked with BDMC to raise a reported £2,500 and distribute 'Black people support the miners' badges at the 1984 Notting Hill Carnival.<sup>47</sup> Simon Berlin from Lambeth NALGO (National and Local Government Officers Association) described collecting there with Staffordshire miners: 'they had never been to London before, and they said they would remember the day for the rest of their lives – because it was the spirit of unity and harmony on that day that was the urban expression of the life they knew in their own villages, and the miners were a natural and feted component at the carnival'.<sup>48</sup> The *Caribbean Times* noted that the links made at the carnival were significant as connections between black miners and black organisations had been rare.<sup>49</sup> Therefore in some instances, in Notting Hill and as described by Lewis for example, networks of translocal black solidarity were developed in addition to connections between white miners and black Londoners.

Yorkshire miner Dave Douglass explained that for those in the coalfields actively involved in the strike, the experience allowed them to 'think

unthinkable things, to embrace impossible ideas, to overcome the most entrenched of stereotypical notions and cautions'.<sup>50</sup> The radical left played a role in developing the personal relationships of support that encouraged such shifts, as is clear in BDMC. This is an example of what David Featherstone has described as 'the generative, transformative character' of solidarity, which can construct relations between diverse groups and create 'new ways of relating'.<sup>51</sup> Douglass emphasised how solidarity from lesbian and gay groups encouraged people to rethink their attitudes on sexuality. The most prominent such organisation was London Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM), which twinned with Dulais in South Wales.<sup>52</sup> Mark Ashton, the instigator of LGSM, was a member of the CP and far-left connections played a role in the establishment of relationships with South Wales.<sup>53</sup> Ashton claimed that LGSM's first meeting consisted entirely of Labour and Communist Party members.<sup>54</sup> Activists from other far-left organisations were also involved and the political diversity was often emphasised: 'we had communists and anarchists, feminists and Trotskyists, liberals and labourites, machos and minis'.<sup>55</sup> LGSM members argued that the common desire to support the strike as a lesbian and gay group forced them to avoid 'incestuous sectarianism'.<sup>56</sup> Although in contrast, Ashton observed that political sectarianism poisoned the atmosphere of some of their meetings.<sup>57</sup> Party political struggles was also one of the reasons for the formation of a separate Lesbians Against Pit Closures group.<sup>58</sup>

As well as developing solidarity relationships with Dulais, LGSM created other networks of connections both within and beyond London. Although there were significant arguments within the groups around its 'whiteness and maleness', attempts were made to broaden the platforms of LGSM meetings.<sup>59</sup> Wilmette Brown, a black lesbian feminist who was involved with BDMC, was one of those invited by LGSM to speak.<sup>60</sup> An LGSM conference had speakers from Rhodesia Women's Action Group, the National Abortion Campaign, the Terence Higgins Trust, Labour Lesbians Group, and Lesbians and Gays Against Imperialism, among others.<sup>61</sup> LGSM took part in general support activity within London, joining power station picket lines for example, and worked with other support groups in the Mineworkers' Defence Committee, bringing the politics of sexuality explicitly into the broader campaign.<sup>62</sup>

London LGSM also inspired a number of groups across Britain and Ireland. Various sources noted lesbian and gay support groups in Huddersfield, Dublin, Swansea, Cork, Glasgow, Leicester, Southampton, Bournemouth, Brighton, Cardiff, Nottingham, Edinburgh/Lothian, York and Manchester.<sup>63</sup> While there was no national organisation, London LGSM was in contact with a number of these groups.<sup>64</sup> Giving a sense of the connections constructed, at one of LGSM's weekly meetings they had guests from the South Wales coalfield, Manchester LGSM and the Dublin Lesbian and Gay Collective.<sup>65</sup>

Contacts were made further afield with international activists and interviews featured for example in *Radical America* in the USA and *Il Manifesto* in Italy.<sup>66</sup> LGSM developed a dense network of overlapping solidarities at various scales. Their activity was generative of new connections among activists within London, between lesbian and gay activists and the coalfields, and perhaps as importantly between lesbian and gay activists campaigning on a labour dispute in Britain, Ireland and to a lesser extent beyond.

### Boundary struggles

The translocal solidarities constructed by groups such as LGSM and BDMC were in part an attempt to challenge divisions on the radical left, elements of which were hostile to a politics that took seriously questions of race, gender and sexuality. For Derek Hatton, Deputy Leader of Liverpool Council and member of Militant, there was a significant difference between their working-class councillors and the middle-class ones in places like Islington more concerned with so-called identity politics.<sup>67</sup> As Jane Wills has commented, ‘geography is often used as a surrogate for the question of class’.<sup>68</sup> Positioning anti-racism, feminism and LGBT liberation as London concerns simultaneously constructed such politics as middle class. Understanding such differences spatially has a way of hardening boundaries between social groups.<sup>69</sup> The solidarity of the miners’ strike, and the warm personal connections developed between diverse places and people, suggested the potential for resisting such boundaries. There can be a tendency to echo the counterposing of class politics to gender, sexual and racial ‘identity politics’ in academic discussions of these issues, missing the complexity of what were often explicitly socialist feminist, anti-racist and LGBT activists.<sup>70</sup> Rather than an attack on class as such, Massey and Wainwright saw in the miners’ support campaign ‘a mutual dependence and a new openness to influence’ between new social movements and trade unions, which ‘demonstrated a different direction for class politics’, not its abandonment.<sup>71</sup>

While groups like LGSM showed the potential for far-left activists to work together and with others in support of the strike, inevitably this was not the whole picture. The miners’ dispute presented an opportunity for different groups to prove their worth against each other and reinforce distinctions on the left. Dave Douglass believed that ‘when push comes to shove in dangerous situations on the picket lines, the “left” are way back with an arm full of papers while the Anarchist is stood to the end with you’.<sup>72</sup> London anarchist Pete Ridley highlighted the anarcho-syndicalist trade union networks of European support that were mobilised independently of the NUM. He argued that those ‘in the Direct Action Movement were pretty active with the miners’ strike, collecting funds, helping on picket lines, etc. Consequently

anarcho-syndicalism (anarchism) got a good name with the miners who were sick of the so-called “Left” who only pushed their particular brand of “bossism”.<sup>73</sup> There is evidence of some limited anarcho-syndicalist influence, for example in contacts developed between Doncaster miners and Barcelona dockers, but more broadly this is probably wishful thinking.<sup>74</sup> Franks has argued that the miners’ strike had a much greater influence on anarchists than they had on it.<sup>75</sup> The strike does not appear to have led to significant recruitment among miners or their families for any section of the far left, with some accounts suggesting Labour was more often the beneficiary of politicisation in the coalfields.<sup>76</sup>

In contrast to anarchists, elements of the CP appeared more interested in asserting their respectability than demonstrating their radicalism. The communist threat loomed large in the fevered rhetoric of Thatcher and other elements of the hard right. The CP was a central element of the ‘hydra that threatens liberty’.<sup>77</sup> Yet some within the CP sought to construct those to their left as alien to the labour movement. The ‘ultra-left’ were described by prominent communists and the *Morning Star* as ‘fringe groups’ and ‘alien forces’, with similar language used by parts of the trade union movement in which the CP had influence.<sup>78</sup> Such attitudes reflected a broader attempt by sections of European communism to establish itself as reputable. In 1968, for instance, the French CP presented itself as the party of order against extremists in the student movement.<sup>79</sup> Some miners saw the radical left as outsiders as well. During a demonstration in London one Yorkshire miner apparently commented that such groups were ‘just scavengers’, with stewards commenting that ‘we just want miners here’.<sup>80</sup> In the coalfields reactions were mixed. Ann Harris from the Notts Central Women’s Support Group, for instance, explained how they ‘had visits from different groups, the WRP, they didn’t go down very well, and a Finnish camera crew from a feminist magazine – and the Greenham women; they went down a bomb!’<sup>81</sup>

The CP’s industrial organiser Peter Carter wrote a draft pamphlet on the strike, unpublished largely because of its hostility towards the NUM leadership, which was as much a polemic against the far left as an analysis of the dispute.<sup>82</sup> The ‘various Trotskyite groups’ were criticised by Carter primarily for their ‘despicable role’ in failing to condemn miners’ violence, which he believed was decisive in weakening support for the strike. But the London Labour left, those around Ken Livingstone, as well as Tony Benn and Dennis Skinner, were equally culpable. Their ‘sectarian approach during the strike actually brought about a realignment of the Left which involved sections of the Left in the Labour Party, the Parliamentary Labour Party and sections of the trade union movement, who found allies in, and spoke the same language as the Trotskyists’.<sup>83</sup> This alliance was arguably the basis for the Mineworkers’ Defence Committee (MDC), a group established by Ken



Livingstone and other prominent London Labour lefts, which sought to coordinate and intensify solidarity for the miners. Carter warned CP District Secretaries that the main group behind MDC was the Trotskyite Socialist Action. The MDC was accused of attempting to usurp the TUC, and wanting to turn days of action for the miners into general strikes. 'The policy and strategy of the Mineworkers' Defence Committee', Carter wrote, 'is very dangerous, adventurist and will do enormous damage to the trade union and labour movement if not challenged'.<sup>84</sup>

This suggests the need to understand the 'far left' as a complex and unstable formation. While elements of the CP sought to integrate themselves within the political mainstream, sections of the Labour left were considerably more radical, and not just Trotskyist entryist groups. As well as forming the MDC, the municipal socialists in London left councils also used state resources to provide practical solidarity.<sup>85</sup> Haringey Council made all local authority buildings – including libraries, schools and community centres – collection points for the miners, politicising what would often be considered neutral spaces.<sup>86</sup> Other London councils provided office space and facilities for miners organising support in London.<sup>87</sup> Southwark Council took the lead in seeking to prevent firms involved in strikebreaking from receiving council contracts.<sup>88</sup> Council workers in some London local authorities were encouraged to donate through wage deductions to the strike support fund.<sup>89</sup> More broadly, the policies of the GLC and others in supporting campaigning organisations helped sustain solidarity activism. They contributed funding for spaces in the capital, from Trade Union Resource Centres to the London Lesbian and Gay Centre, that were used to support the miners' strike.<sup>90</sup> This again blurred the boundaries between the Labour Party and the extra-parliamentary left. While there were of course weaknesses in the municipal socialist project, the support the GLC and others provided for the miners' strike suggested ways of using the local state apparatus to push back against neoliberalism.<sup>91</sup>

The spaces that the Labour left helped sustain were important. Stephen Brooke has observed that in London 'post-68 social movements [...] sought to gain a physical presence in the city (through the establishment of centres) in the 1980s. If there were enterprise zones, there were also social democracy zones as well'.<sup>92</sup> This could be extended to include spaces such as union resource centres, and integrating the role of Labour councils – as Brooke does – highlights the overlapping of labour and post-68 liberation movements. An expanded sense of these spaces would include those at the intersection of the commercial and the political, for instance the lesbian and gay pubs and clubs that LGSM collected outside, and held fundraisers and meetings in.<sup>93</sup> As Lucy Delap has argued in relation to feminist bookshops in this period, attention to such spaces can complicate ideas of social movements as ephemeral.<sup>94</sup> Bookshops such as Collet's, Gay's the Word and New Beacon,



played a role in the miners' support movement.<sup>95</sup> This presence was paralleled by spaces such as the miners' welfares in the coalfields. Both in London and in mining areas such physical rootedness embedded labour and radical politics in localities, but at the same time enabled the construction of solidarities across space. It is necessary then to see how political movements can be 'place based, but not necessarily place restricted'.<sup>96</sup>

While the radical left played a significant role in the support movement, it was unable to exert a decisive influence on the struggle. The declining state of the CP was particularly important in this. The Thatcherite right almost certainly had an exaggerated sense of the importance of communist influence in post-war British trade unionism, although Labour was not incapable of red-baiting during industrial disputes either.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, CP activists did have influence in a number of industries, notably in engineering. E. P. Thompson reflected on NUM General Secretary (1968–84) Lawrence Daly's background in the West Fife CP in the 1950s that there was 'no comparable organization in which a young miner could enlarge his horizons both nationally and internationally, advance his political knowledge, effect contacts with intellectuals and with workers in other industries, while exerting a growing influence within his own community'.<sup>98</sup> The CP played an important role in developing networks of solidarity. Communist activists were key in organising the support of engineering workers at Saltley in the 1972 miners' strike for instance.<sup>99</sup> Raphael Samuel observed that during the 1966–67 Roberts-Arundel strike in Stockport, solidarity action organised by Manchester communist engineers introduced tactics that would become widespread during trade union disputes in the 1970s: mass pickets, sympathetic demonstrations and mobilisation of help from outside.<sup>100</sup>

The Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (LCDTU), a body established in the 1960s by the CP, had sufficient influence in 1970 that between 350,000 and 600,000 people responded to their call for unofficial strike action over the Conservative government's industrial relations legislation.<sup>101</sup> The LCDTU still existed at the time of the 1984–85 miners' strike, and was involved in organising demonstrations in London, but was in no position to lead comparable resistance.<sup>102</sup> In part this of course reflected the broader political situation. Nevertheless, the CP itself was considerably weaker, lacking the workplace organisation it once had.<sup>103</sup> The CP may have been 'proud' of their record during the strike but others were less effusive.<sup>104</sup> Bill Matthews from Hatfield Main NUM argued that the CP Executive 'played little or no part in the dispute compared with the magnificent role they played in the 1972 and 1974 strikes. During those strikes their organisational contribution was a major reason why the NUM succeeded.'<sup>105</sup>

The comparative weakness of the CP in the mid-1980s in part reflected internal divisions, with bitter arguments between the Eurocommunist-influenced

leadership of the party aligned with *Marxism Today* and the more traditional supporters of the *Morning Star*. The nature of trade unionism was central to this dispute and the miners' strike only exacerbated these tensions.<sup>106</sup> Certainly local Communist parties undertook the kind of general support activity many others did.<sup>107</sup> Yet it is striking how during one of the most significant industrial disputes in British history correspondence in the *Morning Star* and within the London area of the CP was considerably more concerned with internal strife. The fighting within the London CP undoubtedly consumed a lot of energy.<sup>108</sup> This is not to argue that the CP played a lesser role than other parts of the radical left. Rather, it is to acknowledge the diminishing influence of an organisation that had more significant roots in the labour movement than others. As individuals, many activists on the far left were undoubtedly tireless in supporting the miners' cause, but they lacked the ability to fundamentally alter the trajectory of the dispute.

### Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the support, the ways in which the radical left in London and elsewhere helped sustain the year-long miners' strike are worth remembering. The practical solidarity of activists, I suggest, is more important than the slogans and analyses produced by the leadership of small parties. Left activists brought people from the coalfields into London and visited mining areas themselves. They took the strike into Londoners' homes, workplaces, students' unions and community centres. Attention to the physical places in which solidarity was enacted highlights how political movements can be simultaneously rooted in localities and able to construct relationships across space. I have argued for a comparatively fluid understanding of the radical left, recognising that its boundaries were unclear and often contested. The autonomously organised support groups of black, feminist and LGBT activists had varying relationships to the more traditional far left, but their history gives a sense of the diverse alliances that were developed between London and the coalfields, and how solidarity could broaden understandings of class politics.

The belief that the miners' strike was 'the Last Showdown between Thatcher and the Left' encouraged extensive support outside the coalfields but also meant the defeat resonated widely.<sup>109</sup> In the midst of the dispute the radical left could proclaim the return of industrial militancy, but after it failed one anarchist observed that 'a depression seems to have engulfed our movement'.<sup>110</sup> The depression was most strongly felt in the coalfields, of course, where the predicted decimation of jobs and communities unfolded. Featherstone has suggested that the significant impact of the solidarity can get lost in 'narrowly goal-based accounts', while recognising the enormous loss and destruction

wrought by the Thatcher government.<sup>111</sup> It is necessary to be careful about using the support movement as a way of gleaning positives out of this history. The strike failed, and it is important to ask why. Nevertheless, in stark contrast to the market individualism of the Thatcher government, the mining communities and their supporters showed the possibility of solidarity between diverse places and people. This is a history that can still be an inspiration in the midst of another vicious Conservative government.

## Notes

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- 11 See 1984–85 issues of *Time Out* and *City Limits*.
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- 39 Hackney Miners Support Committee, 'Hackney Pit Prop', February 1985, LHASC/CP/LON/IND/2/16; Hackney Miners Support Committee, leaflet for 'Solidarity with the Miners' rally, 17 January 1985, George Padmore Institute, GB 2904 LRA/01/0563; John La Rose, letter to the Miners Families Christmas Appeal, 5 December 1984, LHASC/WAIN/1/2.
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## ‘You have to start where you’re at’

### Politics and reputation in 1980s Sheffield

*Daisy Payling*

In 1981 Sheffield City Council’s May Day celebrations splashed onto the front page of the *Sheffield Star* under the headline: ‘Uproar ... as the red flag flies from Town Hall’.<sup>1</sup> The flag, hoisted to celebrate International Labour Day, was taken by some as a sign of allegiance to the Soviet Union. Protestors draped a coffin with the Union Jack and brandished placards reading ‘Better Dead Than Red’.<sup>2</sup> Five days later, the *Sheffield Star* published letters calling for the flag-flyers to be ‘deported to Russia’, claiming ‘no wonder the Town Hall is being referred to as the Kremlin!’<sup>3</sup> In response to the backlash David Blunkett, leader of Sheffield City Council, explained that the flag was flown ‘to recognise the dignity and solidarity of working people’ globally.<sup>4</sup> He protested: ‘the whole thing is taking on an absurdity which is distorting everything else. We should be talking about the real issues the Council are dealing with.’<sup>5</sup> Of those ‘real issues’ the most prominent were the city’s rising unemployment level and attacks on local services caused by a reduction in government grants. The latter were part of the Thatcher government’s wider aim to curtail the power of local authorities, seen by some as ‘bastions of the left’.<sup>6</sup>

Sheffield City Council set up a Department for Employment and Economic Development to focus on the local economy, worked to slow council house sales, and campaigned to keep cheap bus fares in South Yorkshire in an attempt to address the city’s economic and employment issues and respond to central government measures such as enterprise zones and the ‘Right to Buy’ scheme.<sup>7</sup> The council also took part in some of the more radical initiatives put forward by new urban left councils like the Greater London Council (GLC). These initiatives, which included positive action on race and gender, came under the banner of ‘local socialism’. They were part of a broader renewal of the left in British politics, which positioned local authorities as

sites of resistance to Thatcherism, drawing the ire of the Conservative government and the right-wing national press.<sup>8</sup> 'Local socialism' had two key features. First, it aimed to balance class and identity politics, attempting to unite them in a new left-wing ideology that could attract mass support by making new alliances and maintaining old ones. Part of a general exploration of new politics, these ideas were perhaps best articulated by Stuart Hall and *Marxism Today's* suggestions that the left could no longer rely on support from the working class, and that left-wing revival lay in the ability to mobilise around identity politics as well as class.<sup>9</sup> Second, 'local socialism' was *local*, and therefore differed depending on the political priorities and personnel of each area.<sup>10</sup>

Sheffield's 'local socialism' was particular to the city's political culture. The red flag flying from the Town Hall was taken as a signifier of the City Council's radicalism, but it also reflected Sheffield's labourism and attempts to bring ordinary people into positions of power and responsibility within local government.<sup>11</sup> Councillors consistently framed policies such as making Sheffield a Nuclear Free Zone and developing an Anti-Apartheid Working Party as economic concerns, but openness to the new and radical ideas shared by other left-wing local authorities contributed to Sheffield's reputation for radicalism.<sup>12</sup> Beyond red flags and the council's Marx Memorial political lecture series, Blunkett had hoped that Sheffield City Council would act as a 'beacon' to communicate its version of socialism across the country.<sup>13</sup> As James Curran and colleagues suggest, this hope was shared by 'a significant section of radical opinion' in cities across Britain who believed the new urban left could develop strategies 'for being both radical and popular', and redefine socialism to withstand 'the whirlwind force of Thatcherism'.<sup>14</sup> However, the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire', as Sheffield's iteration of 'local socialism' became known, instead acted as a beacon that attracted left-wingers to Sheffield, drawing in activists like moths to a flame. Many of these left-wingers came specially to work for Sheffield City Council because of its reputation and once in the city joined social movements outside of work, such as peace, environmentalism and feminism. In these movements they built their own activist milieu in the city; an activist-led 'Socialist Republic' that existed both inside and outside, or in and against, the local state – and one which caught Blunkett somewhat by surprise.

This chapter explores the ideas behind the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire' and shows how Blunkett's policy of 'building from the bottom' worked in practice during the miners' strike.<sup>15</sup> Underlying Sheffield's radical reputation was a push for community-led activism and a council that attempted to answer to the community. Who this community included, however, was up for debate among both councillors and activists, as was the notion of Sheffield as a radical city. This chapter shows, by tracing Blunkett's ideas

on paper and in practice and how these were met by activists, that behind the rhetoric of radicalism, Sheffield's activism was centred on more traditional notions of working-class community and labourism than the radical tendencies of the new urban left and the revolutionary left. This was particularly evident in responses to the miners' strike by both Sheffield City Council and a large proportion of activists involved in the struggle. Despite Sheffield's radical reputation, which was used and built upon by activists in the 1980s, Sheffield's activism was kept in check by the unwritten guideline shared by councillors and certain 'home-grown' activists alike that 'you have to start where you are at' and could not push for too much too soon.<sup>16</sup> Sheffield's reputation for radicalism was pervasive, but contested, and this chapter shows how it was in turn built, used and played down for political purposes.

### **'Socialist Republic': the development and management of a radical reputation**

The phrase 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire' caught on in the 1980s, but the roots of Sheffield's 'local socialism' lay over a decade earlier. In the 1967–68 local elections Sheffield Labour Party lost control of the city council for only the second time since 1926. This defeat ultimately led to the election of an entirely new council in 1973, and throughout the 1970s a new cohort of Labour councillors came to power.<sup>17</sup> Influence over policy had previously rested to the right of the Labour Group in the hands of a small group of senior councillors with trade union or working-class backgrounds, but the new cohort rose through the ranks to chair important committees. David Blunkett, one of this cohort, became leader of the council in 1980, which reinforced the dominance of the new urban left. Sheffield's press greeted his appointment, with both the *Morning Telegraph* and the *Sheffield Star* publishing interest pieces. As well as predicting that a Blunkett-led council was likely to 'spend, spend, spend', and noting that he was concerned with 'helping average folk help themselves', the press focused on the novelty of his ideas.<sup>18</sup> The *Sheffield Star* reported that 'David Blunkett's commitment is to "democratic socialism" ... He is one of a new breed of young, radical politicians who are exerting an increasing influence on Town Hall politics.'<sup>19</sup> The *Morning Telegraph* called him 'that unusual political animal, one who has taken the time to read Marx beyond the fly jacket' because of his politics degree.<sup>20</sup> While the newspapers speculated that Blunkett's education might hinder his relations with the Labour Group, Blunkett and the rest of Sheffield's new generation of councillors settled in relatively peacefully.<sup>21</sup> As socialist-feminist Hilary Wainwright explained in her work on the Labour Party: 'In Sheffield, there was no lost generation of the sixties and seventies.' Younger councillors received 'a leg up' from the left-wing minority in the previous

cohort.<sup>22</sup> It was a smooth takeover, but there was an expectation in the city for something new and 'radical'.<sup>23</sup>

Blunkett was just one of the key personalities in Sheffield. The city's new urban left included other councillors: Bill Michie, Roger Barton, Peter Price, Joan Barton, Clive Betts, Helen Jackson, Mike Bower and Rev. Alan Billings.<sup>24</sup> Most of these councillors were 'homegrown ... activists' from the east end of Sheffield.<sup>25</sup> Some were university educated, but many came from families of manual workers. Bill Michie had left school at fifteen, worked as a skilled engineer for twenty years, and was a shop steward in the Amalgamated Engineering Union.<sup>26</sup> Roger Barton was also a skilled engineer and had come to politics through the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council, of which he was one-time secretary.<sup>27</sup> Both Barton and Peter Price were sons of steelworkers, though Price himself went to grammar school then university to become a technician.<sup>28</sup> Joan Barton was a clerk with the Yorkshire Electricity Board, and Betts was from a family of manual workers. He went to Cambridge University before returning to Sheffield. Most of the councillors had served on the Sheffield Trades and Labour Council; a joint council which only separated in 1974 after much protest.<sup>29</sup> The Trades Council continued to enjoy a close relationship with both the Labour Party and the Communist Party and this intimacy was consolidated by kinship networks. Multiple generations of Sheffield's political families, the Caborns, the Bartons and the Flannerys, were represented at high levels in all three.<sup>30</sup> Nearby adult education institutions Wortley Hall and Northern College acted as political training grounds for Sheffield's labour movement, and Sheffield's new cohort of councillors had close connections with both. Their familiarity with the wider labour movement meant these councillors understood local working-class culture and were considered part of it. As Blunkett puts it: 'we were rooted in the trade unions'.<sup>31</sup> They continued to prioritise the concerns of the labour movement and maintained a culture of labourism within their new agenda.

We can see how this new agenda of 'local socialism' took shape in the 1980s by looking at David Blunkett's interviews and writings. From the start of his leadership Blunkett called on communities within Sheffield to engage with politics, and this, more than any other new urban left policy, was the overriding ethos of Sheffield City Council at this time. Over the course of the decade, engagement with community groups gradually came to include black and minority ethnic and women's organisations, which led to policies of a more new urban left flavour. But in 1980, Blunkett made it clear that his idea of community was shaped by the traditional and labourist institutions of the working class: 'we are going to have to rely on people in the community – the trade unions, the district Labour Party, tenants' groups – to help identify the worst effects of Government policy and to suggest ways of overcoming

them'.<sup>32</sup> He aimed to bring departments and these 'active groups' together in a coordinated approach to Sheffield's problems. This was reiterated in *Building from the Bottom*, a pamphlet published in 1983. Here Blunkett and Geoff Green explained that Sheffield's community involved 'a sense of shared experience and interdependence ... built around principles long embodied in the trade union movement'.<sup>33</sup> By drawing on the opinions, skills and 'everyday experience of working people', and by winning their 'hearts and minds', Blunkett and Green aimed to build a 'mass movement' – but at this stage it was a movement that prioritised class and the labour movement rather than the fusion of class and identity politics favoured by the new urban left.<sup>34</sup> Blunkett was building on his experience as chair of the Social Services committee where he had encouraged people to 'feel that the services belonged to them', with all the connotations of rights and responsibility that ownership implied.<sup>35</sup>

Nowhere was this ethos more present than in the council's Community Apprenticeship Workshop Scheme. The scheme took twelve people who were already active in their communities in Sheffield and trained them to become community workers. In every ten weeks the apprentices spent one week studying at Northern College, learning the history of community work and reading theorists like Ambalavaner Sivanandan, and the other nine weeks working on community projects.<sup>36</sup> The scheme took Blunkett and Green's rhetoric about engaging people in the community and made it happen. Blunkett said that it stemmed from his belief that there was 'enormous talent in communities' despite a lack of opportunities. They took talented people and trained them to 'be the voice of and the activists within' the community and the workforce.<sup>37</sup> The scheme fit well with Northern College's educational programme. The college aimed to bridge the gap between school and university, supporting further study and employment, but it also placed a high value on building self-confidence, expanding cultural horizons and encouraging its students to engage in public affairs as 'active citizens'.<sup>38</sup> The first principal, Michael Barratt Brown, and senior lecturer Keith Jackson – the then-husband of Councillor Helen Jackson – were 'committed socialists', and regularly developed courses with local trade unions, tenants' associations, community groups and minority ethnic organisations in order to keep students immersed in the real political world of their local communities.<sup>39</sup> Both Kath Mackey and John Lawson completed the Community Apprenticeship Workshop Scheme and went on to work for the council, Mackey in the Department of Employment and Economic Development, while Lawson developed his occupational health programme with the Race Equality Unit.<sup>40</sup> Both had active political lives outside of the council, Mackey in the Communist Party and Women Against the Pit Closures, Lawson in trade union activism and occupational health.

Despite its focus on engaging traditional working-class community activists, the scheme itself was quite radical. For a start, of the twelve people chosen to be on the scheme there were six men, six women, six black and minority ethnic people and six white people. They were deliberately chosen to represent their communities and learn from each other's struggles and experiences.<sup>41</sup> John Lawson explained that they learnt the history of different types of community work; from its philanthropic and liberal roots, to Marxism and 'in and against the state' arguments before deciding what type of community worker they wanted to be. In the words of Lawson:

We could be a philanthropic – picker up of dog shit – type of community worker, organising lunch clubs ... Or ... [it was] entirely valid to do a Marxist and services type community work where you were an in and against the state type ... just helping community organisations to get to a certain level and then stop. Or you could carry on agitating and agitating ... Essentially I became a paid agitator ... Which was wonderful.<sup>42</sup>

As Councillor Helen Jackson put it, Northern College 'churned out activists'.<sup>43</sup> But this caused difficulties as it contributed to Sheffield's radical reputation. Blunkett said: 'I think it was Sir Keith Joseph who described them as urban guerrillas – we used to have a laugh about how you spelt it.'<sup>44</sup> The Tories on the council accused Labour of developing a revolutionary cell and the resulting uproar landed Blunkett on the BBC's *Question Time*, a rare opportunity for a local politician.

Sheffield's radical reputation was cemented nationally. Even before the scheme, people on the left had come to Sheffield to work with the council or to live in a city where it was 'alright to be socialist, it was appropriate'.<sup>45</sup> When Councillor Alan Billings left Leicester after being attacked for his anti-racist views he had thought, 'Where's a good Labour town?' before choosing Sheffield.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Emma Rattenbury who later headed up the council's Women's Unit came to Sheffield because she 'wanted to be where the real working class were in the north of England'.<sup>47</sup> As soon as they arrived, she and her partner joined the Labour Party, though they had been members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). During her time at the council, Rattenbury remembers that the Department of Employment and Economic Development 'imported a lot of quite radical both men and women to work for it'.<sup>48</sup> Jol Miskin's partner was one such woman, and Miskin, who had followed her to Sheffield, said: 'I naively thought with my experience ... given what South Yorkshire was like politically ... I would get a job!'<sup>49</sup> Blunkett and Green had written that 'people who work for local authorities have got to be committed to a new type of politics ... they are part of community action'.<sup>50</sup> With the resulting influx of left-wingers of all stripes they got more than they bargained for. Blunkett admits: 'we got hoisted

with our own petard ... when you call for everyone of good will and the same ilk to rally you don't always know what worms are going to creep in with them'.<sup>51</sup>

Writing in 1981, Keith Bassett, an academic and Labour councillor based in Bristol, reported that there was a growing group on the left who, inspired by the ideas in works such as *In and Against the State* and *Beyond the Fragments* were focusing on struggles against the local state.<sup>52</sup> They questioned how to reconcile state intervention with their growing conviction that the welfare state could be an oppressive force.<sup>53</sup> Just as *In and Against the State* had been written by those who worked for the local state or for state-funded organisations, so many of the activists who worked for or with Sheffield City Council saw the need to bring 'the struggle for socialism into our daily work', which included fighting against the state sometimes.<sup>54</sup> Despite his reservations, Blunkett was not inherently against this critique and encouraged discussion. Sheffield held an *In and Against the State*-themed conference in June 1981 for local authority staff to talk about 'working for the "Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire"'.<sup>55</sup> It was attended by future councillor Dave Morgan, Keith and Helen Jackson, Geoff Green and Blunkett himself, who contributed a paper on whether 'social policy at a local level can contribute to the redistribution of wealth'.<sup>56</sup>

Blunkett and Labour members of Sheffield City Council embraced and contributed to the city's growing reputation. They celebrated Sheffield's radical history and the role the city council had played in it, though they often commemorated moments that strengthened Blunkett and Green's labourist community ideal. In 1982 Sheffield Women's Printing Co-op reprinted *Six Years of Labour Rule in Sheffield, 1926–32*, a pamphlet originally published in 1932 to celebrate the first six years of Labour control. David Blunkett wrote the foreword and made comparisons between the 1930s and the 1980s, calling on activists to fight 'anti-Labour' forces as they had done fifty years earlier.<sup>57</sup> Activists and politicians in Sheffield purposefully embraced their activist history to sustain it. The Samuel Holberry Society for the Study of Labour History produced booklets on Sheffield's past labour activism throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and the Women's History Group compiled a radical walk in 1982 that focused on the history of Chartism and women's suffrage. Occasionally radical history became entwined with perceptions of contemporary activism. Councillor Helen Jackson, when talking about the 1981 People's March for Jobs, accidentally referred to it as 'the Jarrow march', one of the better-known hunger marches of the 1930s.<sup>58</sup> Left-wing activists and politicians in Sheffield drew these comparisons both unconsciously and with calculated intention, drawing on local memory and family histories to create 'communities of solidarity across time' and inspire action.<sup>59</sup>



Engagement with radical policies, ideas and history drew left-wingers to Sheffield, but they were not always welcomed. Blunkett claims that, as Sheffield's radical reputation grew, more members of revolutionary groups such as the Socialist Workers Party, the Revolutionary Communist Party and the International Marxist Group arrived intending to use the city as a base from which to develop their organisations.<sup>60</sup> These were not the 'like-minded' activists Blunkett had hoped for. His furious reaction was quoted in the *Sheffield Star*: 'these people pretend to be on the side of the working people while at the same time they aim to smash the only major organisation in the city capable of carrying out radical policy'.<sup>61</sup> Alan Billings, Deputy Leader of Sheffield City Council in the 1980s, remembers 'the militancy ... the politics was very raw' and led to 'long meetings and a lot of abuse'.<sup>62</sup>

Sheffield Labour Group shared Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock's fear of Militant Tendency, but Militant had a relatively weak hold in Sheffield. This was in part because of its low membership figures nationally; by 1983 it had only 4,700 members, but also because, as Callaghan argues, Militant was strongest where other socialist tendencies were weak.<sup>63</sup> Sheffield had its own strong socialist tradition. One Militant member explained in 1982 that 'in Sheffield we are part of a much bigger left movement'.<sup>64</sup> That year, Militant had two councillors on Sheffield City Council, Paul Green and Mike Smith, and were influential in Sheffield's six branches of the Labour Party Young Socialists, who were known to be controlled by Militant nationally.<sup>65</sup> Even so Militant Tendency was not a convincing threat to the leadership or discipline of Sheffield Labour Party. Instead Blunkett and the Labour Group were concerned that being associated with Militant and groups like the SWP was electorally damaging. They feared they would lose traditional Labour voters if their large rate increases were tainted as 'excessive' by a radical reputation. Bob Barwell, a disgruntled Labour voter in Sheffield Hallam, personified this concern. Barwell campaigned for independence from the city council and the ability to set a new rate under the slogan 'Home Rule for Hallam', attracting support from two hundred people. Barwell reasoned: 'I've always voted Labour, it's the only sensible party. But we want to get rid of these left-wingers.'<sup>66</sup>

Blunkett responded by trying to distance the council from the far left. He made accusations about the far left trying to destroy the labour movement, and he began to publicly refer to Sheffield's Labour Group as 'firm left' in an attempt to manage the city's reputation. The phrase 'firm left' drew a contrast with Liverpool's 'hard left' and the 'looney left' label that had saddled the GLC, other local authorities viewed as sites of resistance to the Thatcher government.<sup>67</sup> Whether Blunkett's claim to be 'durable and reliable, without being inflexible' was accepted is uncertain.<sup>68</sup> As the *Sheffield Star* noted drily: 'For those who see the hue of Sheffield's labour movement as

the brightest of reds, the idea of left-wing groups trying to undermine it can only produce faint incredulity.<sup>69</sup> Within Sheffield, members of far-left organisations and Trotskyist groups were certainly viewed with suspicion. Thirty years on, Blunkett has a more measured approach to such groups. He remembers them now as making his life difficult because, for a lot of them, the council's policies could never go far enough.<sup>70</sup>

This was certainly the case with John Lawson who suggests that the council's Community Apprenticeship Workshop Scheme 'created a monster'.<sup>71</sup> Lawson was left feeling particularly disappointed by Sheffield City Council's response to the poll tax in the late 1980s. During a campaign to stop private landlords buying up council houses earlier in the decade, Lawson had built up a large network of activists on Parsons Cross, the largest estate in Sheffield. At the behest of Blunkett he had 'educated' them – 'what he meant was agitate'.<sup>72</sup> When the poll tax was announced Blunkett phoned Lawson and asked him to mobilise the tenants of Parsons Cross again. Lawson did and to start with had Blunkett's support to use the 'Can't Pay, Won't Pay' slogan.<sup>73</sup> However, after a while Blunkett demanded they pay the tax and protest in different ways. This surprised neither Lawson nor his wife Sue, who explained: 'you just don't expect revolution to come from Town Hall'.<sup>74</sup> They were frustrated and saw it as hypocrisy on Labour's part. In the early 1980s Sheffield City Council had cultivated a radical reputation as the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire', and benefited from the skills and enthusiasm of community workers drawn to the council by the promise of radicalism. For some of the activists who worked for the council, later attempts by the Labour Group to distance themselves from the far left were seen as a betrayal. As Lawson puts it, the council created 'little beacons of hope for people ... but we want a bakery not fucking crumbs'.<sup>75</sup>

Nowadays David Blunkett is less enthusiastic about Sheffield's radical history but is still keen to shape historical memory on his terms. When asked about the phrase 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire', Blunkett says it was meant to poke fun at themselves and remind them that 'we shouldn't take ourselves as seriously as we were'.<sup>76</sup> He maintains that they were not 'revolutionaries': participation, engagement and political education were the key aims. Policies like the anti-nuclear stance were 'gesturism'.<sup>77</sup> Befitting his role under New Labour, Blunkett claims that in Sheffield they were attempting to develop their own alternative middle ground, and were searching for a 'third way' a decade before Anthony Giddens coined the term. To do this they engaged with all kinds of people, radical and not. In the 1990s Giddens consulted Geoff Mulgan, who had moved from *Marxism Today* to Downing Street to work in the policy unit.<sup>78</sup> Over a decade earlier Blunkett and Sheffield City Council opened up their debates to radical thinkers such as Stuart Hall, from the same New Left tradition, as well as people from

Sheffield's traditional working-class institutions, and later the city's black and minority ethnic communities.<sup>79</sup> But whatever middle ground Blunkett would like to retrospectively claim for Sheffield City Council, the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire' undoubtedly drew attention on the left and brought activists to the city.

Both now and in the 1980s, Blunkett struggled with Sheffield's radical reputation, in turn courting it and denying it. It was a double-edged sword. It brought enthusiastic potential community workers to the city, but subjected the city council to criticism from all sides of the political spectrum. Sheffield City Council incorporated new urban left policies, but their priorities remained with working-class constituents and class-based politics. Their project of renewal focused on employment, transport and housing to combat the decline of the steel industry and the Thatcher government's commitment to privatisation. They joined forces with other local authorities to campaign against rate-capping, one of the Conservative government's most successful attempts to curtail local government power. But, compared to other new urban left councils, Sheffield's political programme was traditional rather than radical and was rooted in community action. When asked about this Blunkett responded that 'you have to start where you are at – that's the problem'.<sup>80</sup> Blunkett and Green called for a new left-wing intellectualism with one breath and encouraged local government workers and service users to participate in community action with the next. They recognised that political engagement started with working people's experiences – 'where they're at. Not just in their lives but in their heads' – and that any form of renewal had to start with the everyday problems the city faced, or else risk alienating voters.<sup>81</sup> Despite this, some of their policies did have a radical dimension that added to their reputation as the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire'. This reputation brought activists to Sheffield to work for the council and the 'Socialist Republic' developed beyond what the council had initially envisaged. Though often obscured by the radical reputation that he himself had done much to cultivate, Blunkett continually strove to present a pragmatic image of a 'firm left' Sheffield that started where people were at. Seen as a betrayal by some, the struggle for pragmatic action was not Blunkett's alone. It was shared by activists and councillors and can be seen most strongly in the responses of Sheffield Women Against the Pit Closures (SWAPC) and Sheffield City Council to the miners' strike of 1984–85.

### **Starting where you're at: down-playing radicalism in response to the miners' strike, 1984–85**

To a certain extent, the dominant narrative of Women Against the Pit Closures is one of traditional and pragmatic activism that celebrates a collective

community identity based on class and the experience of the mining industry. In October 1984, the *Sheffield Star* reported on the activities of so-called women ‘of spirit and purpose’ who ran a support group in Chesterfield. Like the wider Women Against the Pit Closures movement in Sheffield, this miners’ support group did not stop at providing soup kitchens.<sup>82</sup> Women were responsible for producing eight hundred food packages a week for the families of striking miners, but they also attended pickets and demonstrations, gave talks and raised funds. The *Sheffield Star* marvelled at ‘former housewives who had never even visited their husband’s pit’ and ‘women who were too shy to speak at local parish meetings’ taking on these activities.<sup>83</sup> In presenting women’s activity around the strike in this way, the *Sheffield Star* helped to construct the narrative that working-class women, nearly always presented as the wives of miners, found new political identities and self-confidence in the strike. This was cemented afterwards by the testimony of the women involved: ‘we’ve done things we’ve never done before – picketing, organised food parcels, demonstrated, spoken at public meetings ... We’ve had to challenge all the ideas and arguments that say “our place is in the home”.’<sup>84</sup>

Sociologists Jean Spence and Carol Stephenson attempt to debunk this narrative, though it is a pervasive one.<sup>85</sup> Spence and Stephenson argue that the narrative obscures the political independence of women in mining communities pre-dating their strike activities and downplays the role of women who were not from pit villages.<sup>86</sup> Sheffield Women Against the Pit Closures was made up of women with varied backgrounds and levels of political experience. It counted among its members teachers, housewives, local authority workers, engineers, pensioners, students, ‘peace women’, bus drivers and miners’ wives.<sup>87</sup> Over the duration of the dispute SWAPC raised £100,000 which they distributed to local pits mostly as food packages.<sup>88</sup> They also travelled Britain giving talks to raise awareness and build links, and they maintained a visible presence on the picket line.<sup>89</sup> While the women who were involved gained new skills and confidence through campaigning, many also built on skills and connections they already had.

Of those with political experience, many were members of far-left organisations such as the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the Socialist Workers Party. Kath Mackey and Janet Heath, who took leading roles in SWAPC, were members of the CPGB. Despite their experience with more radical politics, both Mackey and Heath echoed Blunkett’s assertion that one had to ‘start somewhere’, often where the least experienced member of the group was politically.<sup>90</sup> This was due in part to their own experiences as working-class women coming into contact with women’s liberation at CPGB women’s weekends held at Wortley Hall in the 1970s.<sup>91</sup> Heath, although a feminist herself, remembers coming from those weekends thinking that they ‘weren’t having these women telling us what we could and couldn’t

do'.<sup>92</sup> Heath and Mackey took these memories into SWAPC meetings and recognised that they had to start where the non-political women were comfortable, even if they found it frustrating. In Heath's memoir of the strike, she wrote: 'it was most essential that the mining women should not be alienated ... you couldn't just tell them to shut up, so we had to go along with it'.<sup>93</sup> In practice this meant prioritising the involvement of women from mining families, who were often described as non-political, stressing that 'it was *their* dispute ... they must be fully involved in the major decisions', and always sending at least one mining woman to speak at events: 'it was an unwritten rule'.<sup>94</sup> Frequently the starting point for involvement was even more traditional and cakes became part of meetings. Heath wrote: 'they liked baking, the mining women, and it was important that they could ... contribute something'.<sup>95</sup> She remembers this now with some exasperation: 'I didn't want them to have bloody cake – I didn't eat cake!', but baking was a common entry point for women in Sheffield's labour movement.<sup>96</sup> Veronica Hardstaff, a councillor in the 1970s, recalls that many Labour Party women were happy to organise jumble sales rather than take on a more political role, and Heath mentioned that the *Morning Star* relied on women for fundraising.<sup>97</sup>

Heath, despite her membership of the CPGB, was preoccupied with keeping more radical far-left politics out of SWAPC to avoid alienating less political members and dividing the group. She maintained that SWAPC had to be careful when choosing who represented them as 'some ... far-left women, would have used the opportunity to put over their own views instead of the views of the group'.<sup>98</sup> This did not always make her popular. Kath Mackey chaired the meetings, with Heath acting as her 'body guard', shielding her from any backlash that occurred over such decisions.<sup>99</sup> One instance that proved particularly divisive was a debate over whether they should send someone to speak at a Troops Out rally in Northern Ireland. Heath explained the difficulties of discussing it with women who did not understand the political situation, and wrote that there was 'horror on certain people's faces' – other women in far-left organisations – when she argued against going.<sup>100</sup> The group sent a miner's wife to speak but the meeting was stormed by police and the SWAPC lost track of the money they had collected. Heath claimed that 'it was around then that some of the mining women began to realise that not everyone in the group could be trusted politically'.<sup>101</sup>

Heath's account of SWAPC suggests that women with more political experience tried hard to keep the group's activism in line with what mining women wanted, and to give less experienced members a prominent role in decision making. To a certain extent, the political women pushed the less political forward far enough to obscure their own role in the movement, contributing forcefully to the dominant narrative which Spence and Stephenson

attempt to overturn. Just as Blunkett strove to encourage community activism by 'building from the bottom', so SWAPC believed they had to start where they were and with what they had. This aversion to radicalism was also present in the council's response to different organisations that supported the strike. Sheffield City Council was happy to facilitate support in different ways, but drew the line at helping Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM).

LGSM asked Sheffield City Council to fund a documentary on their work 'to inform people of the ... common problems of media distortion, police harassment and state oppression of both the mining communities and lesbians and gays'.<sup>102</sup> Their request was refused by David Blunkett who suggested that 'it would be inappropriate' for the council to provide funding.<sup>103</sup> Kelliher notes that this attitude was unusual. Support was given to LGSM by the National Union of Mineworkers nationally and by the Dulais support group.<sup>104</sup> This might just indicate the attitude of specific members of Sheffield Labour Group to homosexuality. Councillor Clive Betts remembers people being 'quite prejudiced' in the early 1980s.<sup>105</sup> But perhaps it indicates something broader about the refusal of the labour movement to incorporate other identities in a meaningful way.<sup>106</sup> It is also suggestive of the ways in which Sheffield City Council attempted to manage its radical reputation. LGSM's project aimed to publicise links that Sheffield's councillors may not have wanted publicised. To combat Thatcherism effectively the Labour Group needed to win over the rest of the electorate. This included people like D. T. Cassidy who wrote to the *Sheffield Star* in March 1988: 'As a Socialist and a miner, I am angry every time ... a Labour-controlled council have made a grant to a lesbian group or a homosexual group ... there are many other more important causes in this country to support, like our collapsing health service.'<sup>107</sup> Starting 'where you're at' or 'building from the bottom' often meant sticking to more traditional political causes to avoid alienating members of the labour movement, Sheffield's core constituency.

### Conclusion

Raphael Samuel concludes his article about Thatcherism and 'Victorian values' by suggesting that 'it would not be the Prime Minister, but the miners defeated in the strike of 1984–85 ... who would have the stronger claim'.<sup>108</sup> When Samuel describes these values as 'family solidarity, the dignity of work, the security of the home, or simply the right of the free-born Englishman to stay put' it is easy to see what he means.<sup>109</sup> But 'Victorian values' were also about looking to the past for answers about the present, something that James Vernon has recognised in the working-class autobiographical reminiscences of the 1930s, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Vernon describes

how, in these accounts, nostalgia for a lost sense of class solidarity 'disguised the active exclusion of people who could not share the Englishness of the remembered past'.<sup>110</sup> These reminiscences encouraged similar narratives of collective community identity based on class and the experience of industry and mining that surrounded Women Against the Pit Closures, and was often celebrated by Sheffield's wider political milieu. As Ben Jones has noted, these nostalgic narratives were produced at a time when working-class communities, and the politics committed to valorising them, were under attack. Such narratives can be read as attempts to critique 'stigmatising representations' of working-class people, and to defend a political position that supported working-class institutions.<sup>111</sup> During and after the miners' strike these narratives helped to hold the movement together, but they also held far-left radicalism and the identity politics of the new urban left in check. In Sheffield, adherence to such narratives conflicted with the city's growing radical reputation and fed into attempts by some to down-play it.

Writings by and interviews with David Blunkett, councillors and activists involved in SWAPC show how the council and labour movement prioritised the involvement of working-class people as an expression of community action. They defined 'community' as traditional and working class in a manner that spoke to Vernon's claims of nostalgia. Sheffield City Council's Community Apprenticeship Workshop Scheme was the flagship policy of this priority. But a pragmatic attempt at involving working-class voices and encouraging an ethos of self-help had the unexpected consequence of adding to Sheffield's radical reputation. This reputation attracted activists to the city who brought new ideas and definitions of activism and community with them, altering perceptions of Sheffield's radicalism. Sheffield's radical reputation became about the city rather than the actions of the city council, and persists today. One activist interviewed by the 2013 Stories of Activism in Sheffield project explained: 'The figure from the past that people want to live up to is the city itself. Sheffield has got a lot to be proud of, and that's what we are trying to emulate.'<sup>112</sup> Activists came expecting a radical city and through their actions they made Sheffield into one.

Although the wider labour movement embraced Sheffield's radical reputation in part by celebrating the city's labour history, the consequences of being known as a radical city took David Blunkett by surprise, and made him uncomfortable. It is telling that the one thing Blunkett and deputy leader Alan Billings would not do again is fly the red flag from the Town Hall; it was 'unnecessarily provocative'.<sup>113</sup> Blunkett does not regret the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire'. He claims that while much of what they tried was 'overly optimistic' it was 'about a moment in time' when finding successful alternatives to combat Thatcherism was a priority and local government was recognised as a key site of resistance. Instead Blunkett regrets the symbol,



the courting of a radical reputation and the divisions it caused, rather than the policies that were generally based around labourist concerns and attempts to listen to working-class people. Flying the red flag broke the unwritten rule of not alienating more moderate and traditional constituents. It went against Blunkett's assertion, seconded by certain working-class activists, that they had to start 'where they were at' politically. Often the 'where' was not particularly radical, and in calling for an inclusive form of renewal that would not alienate the wider working-class community, Sheffield City Council and the labour movement excluded newer forms of activism and identity politics from Sheffield's political milieu.

Despite being excluded from the dominant political environment, activists involved in movements such as anti-racism, environmentalism, and gay and lesbian rights activism, created their own spaces in Sheffield's politics, and carved their own radical history. *Stories of Activism in Sheffield* organised a city walk, which wove interviews with activists taken in 2013 into the 1982 Women's History Group radical walk. It included stories from lesbian and gay activists, black and minority ethnic activists, peace activists, and memories of the miners' strike alongside older stories of Chartism and women's suffrage. *Stories of Activism* is a celebratory project meant to inform people of Sheffield's radical past and inspire new political activity, but it also shows how Sheffield's radical reputation was, and is, shaped and defined by activists, despite attempts by the city council to control it in the 1980s.<sup>114</sup> At the root of Sheffield's radical reputation was a complex political milieu that embodied many of the struggles the British left endured as it attempted to renew itself and bring about 'New Times'. At certain points Sheffield City Council engaged with the identity politics of the new urban left, but in general it focused on working-class constituents and their perceived needs. Meanwhile, outside the council a thriving activist community brokered its own politics.

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## Origins of the present crisis?

The emergence of 'left-wing' Scottish nationalism,  
1956–81

*Rory Scothorne and Ewan Gibbs*

In August 2010, prominent figures from across Scottish society gathered at Govan Old Parish Church in Glasgow for the funeral of Jimmy Reid, the Communist shop steward who led the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders 'work-in' of 1971–72. The mourners included Alex Salmond, then First Minister and leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), and Gordon Brown, the recently departed leader of the Labour Party and former Prime Minister. Celebrations of Reid's life and legacy from both Nationalist and Labour politicians at the funeral and in the press were testament to the peculiar symbolic role that Reid has come to play in modern Scottish political discourse; he represents an intermingling of class and national identity that characterises a particular idea of Scottish 'social justice'. There are various contending claims on Reid and his legacy, which reflect Reid's political trajectory from the Communist Party, to the Labour Party, and finally to the SNP; but Reid's symbolic significance also lies in the way that this trajectory was to a great extent *followed* by an entire generation of Scottish activists, politicians and intellectuals. It is this evolution – from the left of the labour movement to a left-wing variant of Scottish nationalism that is at least rhetorically influential today – that this chapter seeks to explore.

The dominant accounts of modern Scottish nationalism's emergence offer a great deal of insight into its origins in political economy, the arts and parliamentary politics, but say little about the origins of its ideological character. The paucity of historical work on the SNP, and particularly on its left wing, which emerged at the end of the 1970s, makes it even harder to understand the fusion of left-wing and nationalist ideas that dominate modern Scottish politics. But Scottish nationalism needs an intellectual history that looks beyond the SNP and into the labour movement and the radical left; the ideas adopted and espoused by the left-nationalists of the 1970s

and 1980s have shaped not only the development of the SNP but also the trajectory of devolution by encouraging Scottish nationalists (both big-N and small-n) to stake a claim on the legacy of working-class politics in Scotland. In her maiden speech, Mhairi Black, SNP MP for Paisley and Renfrewshire South, launched an attack on a Labour Party that was widely perceived to have abandoned its traditional working-class constituency:

I like many SNP members come from a traditional socialist Labour family and I have never been quiet in my assertion that I feel that it is the Labour Party that left me, not the other way about. The SNP did not triumph on a wave of nationalism; in fact nationalism has nothing to do with what's happened in Scotland. We triumphed on a wave of hope, hope that there was something different, something better to the Thatcherite neo-liberal policies that are produced from this chamber.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of rhetoric was pervasive during the Scottish independence referendum campaign from 2012–14 and the SNP's election campaign in 2015. By neutralising and appropriating the traditions of the Labour Party and the loyalty of their voters, the SNP has replaced Labour as the dominant political force in Scotland and converted a significant swathe of the population to support for independence as the natural expression of the Labour tradition. The recent emergence of a prominent network of radical left activists who support independence – in the 'Left Alliance' RISE, the Scottish Green Party, the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) – suggests that Scottish nationalism has spread far beyond the SNP, particularly on the left.

Our thesis is that the profound shift in political consciousness that has taken place in Scotland cannot simply be ascribed to changes in political economy, popular culture and parliamentary and constitutional changes, as most accounts suggest. As important as those factors are, the role of ideas in legitimating and mediating these changes in a way that favours Scottish nationalism must also be emphasised. A 'left-wing' Scottish nationalism did not spring fully-formed from the 'present crisis' that Perry Anderson diagnosed in the 1970s;<sup>2</sup> it was not simply imposed inevitably on unthinking Scots by the vicissitudes of circumstance. This outlook was consciously adopted by a generation who had come to maturity in the heterodox left-wing intellectual environment of the 1960s and 1970s. In the political and economic circumstances of the time, a turn to the Scottish nation as a new form of left-wing identification could be legitimated by an emergent constellation of ideas about class, economic development and international politics, which had material and political roots in the mid-1950s.

This argument depends on a certain conception of the role of ideas. Ideas are used to understand a given situation and justify a certain course of

action; while they do not succeed on intellectual coherence alone, they must have a certain capacity to explain the world in a way that makes sense to those who receive them, in line with those people's experiences and preconceptions. As such, the nature of the ideas selected can change the course of action that they are used to legitimate as well as the degree of success of that course of action. There is a choice, albeit a limited one, of ideas at any point in time, but the results of that choice can be crucial. 'Left-wing' Scottish nationalism succeeded at least in part because there was no powerful unionist alternative, but also because it successfully drew together salient theories about the world and the British state in a way that fitted the priorities of left-wing activists in Scotland at the time.

This chapter will begin with an investigation of the existing historiography of Scottish nationalism. Having identified varying approaches to the topic and their limitations, we will explore the intellectual origins of left-wing Scottish nationalism. We will consider the role of debates within British and European Marxism after the pivotal events of 1956, including the Anderson-Nairn thesis and World-Systems theory. As well as the international and intellectual significance of 1956, 1955 saw the all-time high Conservative vote at a general election in Scotland of 50.1 per cent and the peak of Scottish industrial employment soon followed.<sup>3</sup> Our analysis therefore focuses on the reception and deployment of 'New Left' ideas in Scotland between the 1960s and 1980s, particularly in the 1975 *Red Paper on Scotland*, edited by Gordon Brown, and Stephen Maxwell's *The Case for Left-Wing Nationalism*, first published in 1981.<sup>4</sup> This will include a consideration of how these ideas shaped and were shaped by the concerns and activities of the labour movement and wider left in Scotland. Our study concludes in the early 1980s, having traced the emergence of a body of Scottish nationalist thought which *only then* rose to prominence during and after the experience of 'Thatcherism', which heightened demands for Scottish autonomy.

### Understanding 'left-wing' Scottish nationalism

In the existing historiography of the development of Scottish nationalism and its inheritance of a social democratic or left-wing character in the latter half of the twentieth century, there are a variety of explanations, stressing different agents and trajectories of change. These can be broadly divided between: accounts that stress the role of literature, the arts and cultural actors; those that place an emphasis on high politics and technocracy, with a leading role ascribed to politicians and civil servants; and those that search for a 'history from below', analysing working-class approaches and attitudes to devolution and the popularising of a 'workers' parliament' during the early 1970s. These latter accounts emphasise industrial

mobilisation and the leftward shift of labour movement politics over the 1960s and 1970s. There are also certain accounts that can be described as ‘nationalist’, in that they posit the Scottish nation itself – as idea or ‘imagined community’<sup>5</sup> – as a key actor in the development of devolution. This typology of various accounts of devolution is necessarily simplistic. There are many overlaps and inconsistencies within those categories, but the various categories are grouped by shared emphases on the key actors and areas of Scottish society where nationalism is believed to originate. With certain exceptions, what is generally shared across these approaches is a sense that the particularly left-wing *ideological* character of the Scottish nationalism that emerged in the 1970s requires relatively little explanation, its contradictions and persuasive power emerging inevitably from a certain historical conjuncture into the minds of whichever actors are perceived to be its pioneers.

Perhaps the most perennially controversial approach to explaining devolution has concerned itself with Scottish ‘culture’, by which we mean more specifically what Gellner refers to as ‘high culture’ – language and the written word.<sup>6</sup> The influence of a self-consciously distinct Scottish literature, in which Scots wrote about Scots, often in Scots (and creatively demotic variations thereof) underpins Cairns Craig’s argument that ‘if Scotland voted for political devolution in 1997, it had much earlier declared cultural devolution ... politics was following cultural activity rather than leading it’.<sup>7</sup> Shelley’s overused line about poets being ‘unacknowledged legislators’ is often given yet another round of exposure in op-eds and panel discussions influenced by this thesis, but of course the point of the thesis is that the Scots could not legislate, so they wrote instead. Murray Pittock writes that the works of writers like James Kelman, Irvine Welsh, Liz Lochhead and Alasdair Gray gave Scotland ‘a form of cultural autonomy in the absence of its political equivalent’. Their ‘explicit and unapologetic Scottishness’ thus laid the foundations for a ‘cultural independence’, which has taken the lead in inspiring a subaltern brand of post-colonial political nationalism.<sup>8</sup> Scholars of Scottish culture have recently cast doubt on these claims. Scott Hames has argued that artists and writers may be better understood as ‘impressive passengers’ on the journey to devolution and the 2014 independence referendum. While expressing discontent they did not fundamentally shape the political process or discussion, and the most recent referendum was characterised by their notable marginalisation and relegation to the status of supporters rather than leaders of the ‘Yes’ movement.<sup>9</sup>

Hames’ account adopts a critical variant of our second category – devolution as a process both instigated and implemented by a technocratic and political elite. The predominant expression of this account is less critical, however, simply taking the agency and legitimacy of that elite for granted.



The accounts of David McCrone, Lindsay Paterson – the sociological ‘Edinburgh School’<sup>10</sup> – and Tom Devine present the emergence of devolution as a fairly obvious and benign governmental response to changing national and international conditions, in line with a ‘middle-class’, ‘centre-left’ or ‘essentially social democratic’ Scottish electoral consensus.<sup>11</sup> However, the vision of social democracy here is a far cry from the modernising, forward-looking project that characterised the early twentieth-century labour movement. As Catriona MacDonald writes:

By the end of the century, Scottish support for devolution was as defensive as the nation’s earlier commitment to the Union status quo had been – it was a means of preserving social institutions and services upon which many Scots relied and a vehicle for delivering economic growth in much the same way as planning had sought to do a generation before.<sup>12</sup>

What goes unexplained by the Edinburgh School account is how the social democratic politics that they identify in Scotland changed from a ‘moral crusade’ to transform society, and into what MacDonald calls ‘a pragmatic response to a set of circumstances that owed much to familiar Scottish claims for “special treatment” to trends across the UK as a whole and to foreign models of devolved governance’.<sup>13</sup>

As an explanation of the ideological origins and material basis of left-wing Scottish nationalism, one of the most important – and overlooked – recent accounts is that of Jim Phillips, who identifies a crucial merging of class and national identities in the industrial politics of 1960s and 1970s Scotland. Phillips’ account improves on that of the ‘cultural’ and ‘institutional’ approaches by taking both global political economy and the balance of class forces seriously. For him, the crucially left-wing character of modern Scottish nationalism has at least some roots in the way that the Scottish labour movement was forced to adapt to changes in British industry under conditions of uneven global development. An appetite for greater national autonomy among the organised working class emerged as a reaction to centralising tendencies in British economic policy and the management of nationalised industries.<sup>14</sup> This can go some way to explaining the roles played by both organised and ‘disorganised’ working-class actors – the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) and the working-class *literati* – that are otherwise unexplained by the ‘institutional’ and ‘cultural’ accounts of devolution.<sup>15</sup>

Tom Nairn and Christopher Harvie also provide materialist accounts of Scottish nationalism’s development, albeit ones coloured by their own nationalist politics. In both cases the circumstances of the failure of the Scottish industrial economy within the British state over the second half of the twentieth century are emphasised; but nationalism as an inevitable

developmental ‘neurosis’ for Nairn, and as a distinct historical political tradition for Harvie, is viewed as the prime mobiliser for political and constitutional change.<sup>16</sup>

While we accept that the material foundations of left-wing nationalism outlined by Phillips are crucial, we contribute an added dimension through emphasising the importance of the intellectual climate and perspectives that shaped and connected with emergent devolutionary demands during the 1960s and 1970s. Some of the foundations for this kind of account have already been provided by Ben Jackson, who writes that ‘Scottish nationalism as we know it today began to take shape only in the 1960s and 1970s, and achieved its present ideological maturity in the course of the 1980s and 1990s’, not as a simple means of defending or promoting Scottish culture, but as the ‘most effective way to promote the political agenda of the left in the neoliberal era’.<sup>17</sup> The process by which Scotland and nationalism combined into a focal point for efforts to promote the left’s political agenda demands further elaboration.

### **Marxism and its discontents**

The emergence of a left-wing variant of Scottish nationalism was stimulated by the post-1956 intellectual climate, in particular the thawing of a hitherto frozen ‘Marxist-Leninist’ orthodoxy and the rise to prominence of heterodox Marxian theories. This opening-up of Marxist thought had ramifications beyond the boundaries of the academy, in social movement politics, resurgent labour struggles, and the increasing willingness of certain Western European Communist Parties to criticise the Soviet Union. These political changes were shaped by and shaped theoretical shifts: in seeking to explain the failure of socialism to conquer Western capitalism and its degeneration in the East, and in grappling with the anti-imperialist revolutions that were sweeping the ‘Third World’, the approach of many on the left to questions of class, state, party, nation, and indeed to Marxism itself, was transformed. This transformation in theory led to further practical adaptations, of which left-wing Scottish nationalism was one.

There was a history of left-wing involvement with Scottish nationalism before 1956. John MacLean, the only British citizen to receive the Order of Lenin, ended his life as an enthusiastic supporter of Scottish independence, while support for Scottish ‘Home Rule’ within Britain was a widely held position across the radical left before the First World War. However, from the 1920s onwards, support for a road to socialism that ran through the unitary British state was predominant.<sup>18</sup> The vehicles travelling this road were, with few exceptions, assumed to be either the Labour Party or at least the Communist Party operating alongside the former; it was the gradual

erosion of these assumptions from the early 1950s that persuaded sections of the left to look elsewhere for a social agent of political change.<sup>19</sup>

In 1956, the Communist Party lost thousands of members, and crucially a wave of intellectuals, appalled by its support for the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the revelations about Stalinism contained in Nikita Khrushchev's 'secret speech'. The same year saw the failed British intervention in Suez, and a huge anti-war protest in Trafalgar Square addressed by Nye Bevan became a key reference point for a generation of British left-wing intellectuals.<sup>20</sup>

The Labour Party's adoption of an Atlanticist foreign policy and support for nuclear weapons was at odds with the desire of British leftists for an independent foreign policy and nuclear disarmament. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was a key site of coalescence for the New Left. In Scotland, anti-nuclear protests at the American Polaris base on Holy Loch allowed the Scottish left to express their dissatisfaction with British military policy and sharpened their estrangement from the formal institutions of the British state. As Labour upheld the Atlanticist line in parliament, a wave of extra-parliamentary dissent opposed it. This shaped the emergence of a British 'New Left', a diverse combination of former Communists, Labour Party members and unaligned intellectuals, brought together by a shared disillusionment with Stalinism and Labour's increasingly conservative politics, and a firmly anti-imperialist and anti-militarist approach to international questions. The *New Left Review* (NLR) brought together the *New Reasoner* and the *Universities Left Review*. The former had been created by former members of the Communist Party Historians' Group (CPHG), most notably Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson. They continued the CPHG's efforts to find a cultural basis for socialism in English radical traditions, while – at least in Thompson's case – acknowledging a distinct Scottish trajectory. *Universities and Left Review* brought together a more diverse group of un-aligned students, often immigrants from British colonies.<sup>21</sup> Stuart Hall, the NLR's first editor, wrote that the journal's approach was rooted in 'the argument that any prospect for the renewal of the left had to begin with a new conception of socialism and a radically new analysis of the social relations, dynamics and culture of post-war capitalism'.<sup>22</sup> NLR would become a crucial staging post for the intellectual development of a left-wing Scottish nationalism, particularly through the work of Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson and the influence of Antonio Gramsci.

The move away from orthodoxy had an international character too. The formation of the Bandung non-aligned movement (NAM), a coalition of states who resisted appropriation by one of the two Cold War camps, and 'Third World' revolutions in Africa, Latin America and East Asia, provided the political context for the development of a global approach to left-wing political economy and theory. In economics, the 'dependency theory' of

theorists like Raul Prebisch, Arghiri Emanuel and Andre Gunder Frank sought to explain the persistent unevenness of capitalist development. Where predominant theories had usually explained this with an emphasis on the internal conditions of under-developed states, dependency theory pointed to the unequal terms of trade between (industrial) 'core' and (extractive) 'peripheral' states. This inequality reproduced inequality, and led to the permanent subordination of the periphery to core. The political conclusions drawn from this tended to conform to a 'Third-Worldist' approach: the working class of the core states was bought off with excess profits from colonial exploitation. This kind of politics influenced not only the revolutionaries of the Third World, but also European radicals seeking to explain the failure of working-class revolution at home.<sup>23</sup>

Third-Worldism provided an identifiable political and social basis to the search for alternative agents of change. It characterised the emergence of a 'second' New Left in Britain, as the control of the *NLR* passed from Stuart Hall to Perry Anderson<sup>24</sup> and its politics took on an overtly 'Marxist-Leninist' character. From the early 1960s until the late 1970s, the *NLR* published a series of articles by Anderson and Nairn, which came to be known as the 'Anderson-Nairn thesis'. This extended previous critiques of the Labour Party by rooting the failure of British working-class politics in the historical development of British capitalism. Anderson and Nairn portrayed the British state as uniquely pre-modern, ill-equipped for twentieth-century capitalism and peculiarly inhospitable to revolutionary politics and culture. Their approach was far more rooted in the global intellectual milieu described above than in the 'first' New Left's emphasis on English culture. Anderson and Nairn had sought to reorient the *NLR* away from British traditions and towards developments in European thought, and particularly the recently rediscovered work of Antonio Gramsci.

Nairn first presented the basics of the Anderson-Nairn thesis in the theoretical journal of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), who promoted Gramsci as part of their efforts to develop a post-Stalinist political strategy for West European communism.<sup>25</sup> One of the most important aspects of Gramscian thought for Nairn was its emphasis on culture and the role of intellectuals. The Anderson-Nairn thesis argued that British culture produced intellectuals who were particularly subservient to the British state, and who upheld capitalist hegemony by pervading every political institution – including the Labour Party. The working class, misled by a deficient intelligentsia and without any developed (Marxist) politics of their own, were thus rendered insurmountably reformist by the specificities of British historical development. However, Gramsci's ideas also held out some hope for an alternative: his distinction between 'civil society' and 'political society' provided Nairn with a means of explaining and weaponising Scotland's position within the British

state. Scotland had its own civil society, furnished with its own semi-autonomous institutions, which carried the 'raw materials' of nationalism between generations. Its distance from Britain's floundering 'political society' combined with the billions of pounds worth of newly discovered oil flowing ashore to make Scottish nationalism the wedge in the cracks of the British ruling class. Describing the SNP's 'It's Scotland's Oil!' campaign of the 1970s, Nairn wrote: 'in an almost terminal condition an ailing empire discovers the treasure to keep it in this world – only to find it snatched from its grasp by greedy troublesome natives'.<sup>26</sup> Nairn explicitly rejects Third-Worldism elsewhere, but its logic is nevertheless present here: the British working class, incapable of self-emancipation, has to rely on an external bourgeois nationalism to break the grip of the British state.

Gramsci's importance extended beyond his influence on Nairn and Anderson, however. His reassertion of the role of culture in socialist politics gave Scottish radicals a theoretical justification for the appropriation of nationalist symbols as 'subaltern' or 'counter-hegemonic'. The blurring of class and national identities in the 1970s Scottish Labour movement was in part enabled by the growing influence of Gramscian ideas on Scottish communists<sup>27</sup> – while their adoption of an increasingly nationalist approach may not have *actually* grown out of a Gramscian analysis, they deployed it to understand the political world in which nationalism was becoming an appealing response to their situation.

### Processes of political change

The heterodox intellectual climate of an increasingly globally conscious European left made its mark on Scottish politics in a variety of ways. In both the theory and practice of Scottish socialists, a new emphasis was placed on questions of development and the place of Scottish 'civil society' within Britain and in a world-wide political-economic system. The national question, the constitution and Scottish national identity as a potentially subaltern force or aspect of resistance to both international capital and the British state were given a novel prominence. This was not solely the result of an ideological transformation, but ideological factors were important in stimulating responses to material changes and configuring political strategies. The intellectual developments discussed above provided a crucial means for socialists to integrate the rise of Scottish nationalism, and the widely perceived failure of the unitary British state, into their worldview.

By the late 1960s, it became evident that states across Europe were incapable of keeping up with the rising expectations of their working class, and Britain was no exception. The Labour Party's 'forward march' had stalled in the 1950s, and the labour movement was increasingly fragmented, under pressure

from a changing industrial structure and faltering economic growth.<sup>28</sup> The obvious failure of the Soviet Union, accentuated by its invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, had robbed the working class of any demonstrable alternative model, and the divided forces of the British far left offered little in the way of effective leadership. The extent to which the Scottish left lost faith in the 'British road to socialism' during this era was confirmed when the STUC remitted a National Union of Mineworkers Scottish Area (NUMSA) motion calling for a devolved Scottish parliament in 1968. NUMSA president and prominent CPGB member Mick McGahey moved the motion articulating the case for a parliament in class terms, citing the growing external control of the Scottish economy and the undemocratic nature of the imposition of industrial policy and investment decisions. A Scottish parliament would stem the loss of mounting job losses in heavy industry and rising unemployment in Scotland's industrial heartlands by restoring economic sovereignty.<sup>29</sup> McGahey anticipated the remarks of fellow Communist Jimmy Reid in the latter's celebrated 'Alienation' speech, made upon his election to the rectorship of the University of Glasgow in 1972:

Government by the people for the people becomes meaningless unless it includes major economic decision making by the people for the people. This is not simply an economic matter. In essence it is an ethical and moral question for whoever takes the important economic decisions in society ipso facto determines the social priorities of that society. From the Olympian heights of an executive suite, in an atmosphere where your success is judged by the extent to which you can maximise profits, the overwhelming tendency must be to see people as units of production, as indices in your accountant's books.

To appreciate fully the inhumanity of this situation, you have to see the hurt and despair in the eyes of a man suddenly told he is redundant without provision made for suitable alternative employment, with the prospect in the west of Scotland, if he is in his late forties or fifties, of spending the rest of his life in the Labour Exchange. Someone, somewhere has decided he is unwanted, unneeded, and is to be thrown on the industrial scrap heap. From the very depth of my being, I challenge the right of any man or any group of men, in business or in government, to tell a fellow human being that he or she is expendable.<sup>30</sup>

Reid's speech was made following his rise to prominence as leader of the 1971–72 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) 'work-in', which was mounted in opposition to the Heath government's attempt to close the 'lame duck' shipyards. Foster's analysis emphasises how Reid's rhetorical strategies weaponised 'Scotland' in claims that the Conservatives' actions were not merely attacks upon Clydeside shipbuilders, but threats to the national economy and its future. The success of this strategy was confirmed in the 1972 'Scottish Assembly' convened by the STUC, which coincided with the

UCS work-in and the 1972 miners' strike. This claimed to represent a unified Scottish civil society response to industrial closures and in favour of home rule, stretching across the political spectrum and class lines, under the leadership of the trade union movement.<sup>31</sup>

Two other key connected factors in the Scottish political situation were the emergence of the SNP as a major electoral force and a mass membership party, and the discovery of North Sea oil. Reid made a nod to this in his rectorial address, stating that 'the untapped resources of the North Sea are as nothing compared to the untapped resources of our people'.<sup>32</sup> Despite this critical attitude, in an apt summary of Scottish economic changes over the third quarter of the twentieth century, the UCS work-in ended with the conversion of the John Brown yard at Clydebank to construct rigging platforms under the ownership of the US multinational, Marathon. The SNP was the key political beneficiary of this new factor in the economic equation. Its simplistic but effective slogan of 'It's Scotland's Oil' proved a highly effective rallying cry in the context of mounting concerns over rising unemployment, dissatisfaction with the British unitary state and perceptions that the latter squandered Scottish resources. These sentiments had been expressed before the North Sea discovery, in the 1967 Hamilton by-election when the SNP's Winifred Ewing won an unlikely victory in a safe Labour seat and overturned a majority of over 16,000. However, it was in the context of the North Sea discoveries and the economic, political and industrial-relations turbulence of the early 1970s when the SNP made its mark. In 1973 Ewing's success was repeated in Govan, a historic Labour centre and a location at the heart of the UCS dispute, by Margo MacDonald. This anticipated its successes at the 1974 general elections; the SNP's October 1974 result, 30 per cent of the popular vote, granted it unprecedented power in a hung parliament.<sup>33</sup>

At this time the SNP was not understood as a socialist party, and was broadly met with the refrain of 'Tartan Tories' across the Scottish left and labour movement, regardless of different constitutional persuasions. 'It's Scotland's Oil' was implicitly predicated on an independent Scotland being a more viable market economy than the UK. This reputation was solidified in the aftermath of the botched 1979 referendum on the Scottish economy, when the SNP paved the way for the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 by voting no confidence in the Callaghan Labour government, triggering a general election.

Yet over the same period a left-nationalist current emerged within the SNP. It remained underground, kept off the pages of the newspapers and off the TV screens until surfacing in the 1980s. The Scottish Labour Party, a pro-independence socialist breakaway from Labour, performed catastrophically in the 1979 election and several of its members – including future prominent



nationalists like Jim Sillars and Alex Neil – found themselves drawn into the SNP. This in turn aided the formation of the ‘79 Group, which also included a young Alex Salmond. Its members argued that the SNP had to take on a socialist or social democratic persona to win working-class votes in central Scotland.<sup>34</sup> The group was expelled in 1982, but its key players and *raison d’être* would guide the party from the late 1980s onwards. The ‘79 Group’s main theorist and chair, Stephen Maxwell, published a pamphlet titled *The Case for Left-Wing Nationalism* in 1981. This combined elements of the Nairn-Anderson thesis, concerns about ‘internal colonialism’ and external economic control, and the possibility of mobilising alternative identities in means other than traditional class struggle to advance socialist aims.

Maxwell was part of the ‘new generation of nationalists’ described by Ewen Cameron who, throughout the 1980s, ‘painstakingly cultivated’ a social-democratic hue for the SNP’s nationalism in stark contrast to their position in the 1970s. But alongside Maxwell’s *Case*, *The Red Paper on Scotland* – edited by none other than Gordon Brown – laid out a critical and constitutionally sensitive set of essays on socialism in Scotland. As Cameron argues:

The importance of the *Red Paper* is not that it was influential, but that it represented a view which was not prominent in the debate over devolution; it stands as a potential starting point, perhaps rough in places (not least in appearance), for a more wide-ranging discussion of Scottish politics and society which never took place despite the extensive Parliamentary debates and acres of newsprint devoted to devolution.<sup>35</sup>

Maxwell and Brown’s texts can be credited with setting out an extensive and coherent set of arguments for (or at least about) left-wing Scottish nationalism that would become widespread over the following decades. Their intellectual force can only be properly understood, however, from a look at the texts and concepts they reference; the *Red Paper* deals with the work of Antonio Gramsci, Paul Mattick, Immanuel Wallerstein, E. P. Thompson, Ayoola Olorunsoa, Arghiri Emmanuel, Ralph Miliband, Michael Kidron, Paul Sweezy, Perry Anderson, Michael Hechter, Herb Gray, Nicos Poulantzas, Andre Gunder Frank and Franz Fanon. Maxwell leans heavily on Nairn, who himself theorised from the shoulders of giants like Gramsci, Ernest Gellner, Miroslav Hroch and Louis Althusser. These were world-theories, with origins far afield from Scotland and indeed the rest of the UK. Furthermore, they required the right conditions in which they could thrive. They were planted in soil that had been tilled for years by a generation of Scottish socialists and trade unionists desperately coming to terms with Britain’s world power and comparative economic decline, and Scotland’s distinct place within this process.



The CPGB played an influential role. Jimmy Reid's memoirs detail the 1964 Communist Party's Scottish conference where he moved a resolution that called on the party to 're-state and clarify our position on the national question and call for the Scottish Labour movement to lead the campaign for a Scottish Parliament'. In Reid's view this was a major departure that facilitated the subsequent deployment of 'Scotland' at UCS: 'the really significant point is that we made sure that the Left of the Scottish Trade Union Movement was aware of our analysis and argument on the National Question'.<sup>36</sup> The influence of these subsequent developments and a growing confidence in deploying left-wing nationalist rhetoric was visible in a speech Reid gave ten years later when standing for the CPGB in Clydebank in the October 1974 general election. Entitled 'The Case for Nationalism', it delineated between 'nationalism' and 'jingoism', arguing that in fact:

The prefix inter- means between, and nationalism is consciousness of the nation to which you belong. Thus if there were no such thing as a nationalist, there could not be an internationalist ... nationalism is a term misunderstood and confused with jingoism. This is chauvinism, a distortion of nationalism which is essentially racist. Whereas a healthy nationalism – a love of all that is good in the history and tradition of your own people – is the true basis of internationalism.<sup>37</sup>

The left-wing nationalism we are discussing emerged from two parallel processes. On one side we find a movement towards pro-devolution positions in the Scottish labour movement, and the increasing use of openly nationalist rhetoric in its conflicts with the British state.<sup>38</sup> Alongside that there was the importation of heterodox radical theories to Scotland from continental Europe and the Third World, where they were adapted for Scottish circumstances and wielded against the prevailing ideology and unitary structure of the British state.

### From theory to practice

What was crucial about the work of Brown and Maxwell was that they *bridged* these parallel processes, applying more general theories to the immediate questions facing the working class and the radical left in Scotland. Brown did so through his developing labour movement connections. The 1983 National Union of Mineworkers' Scottish Area conference aptly summarised this meeting of intellectual, political and industrial forces within the Scottish labour movement. Mick McGahey, area president and CPGB stalwart, advanced an argument that would become predominant within Scotland during the 1980s: given Scotland voted Labour, Tories did not have a mandate to implement 'policies [that] had led to the deindustrialisation

of the country, to the decimation of the coal steel and railway industries, to the threat to the shipbuilding industry and to the attacks on social services'. As 'The Conservative Government does not represent Scotland', he called on the Scottish Labour Party leadership 'to reconsider their position of refusing to take part in a broad based campaign for a Scottish Assembly', which could mobilise 'all progressive and democratic opinion in Scottish society'. McGahey was supported by Brown, the newly elected MP for Dunfermline East, representing the Scottish Council of the Labour Party. He counterpoised the NUM's campaign against pit closures with Tory policies that would 'create industrial deserts in Scotland'. Brown implored the Scottish Area to 'put the case for the establishment of a Scottish Assembly' in order 'to save a country where more people were without permanent jobs than there were people employed in the manufacturing and mining industries'.<sup>39</sup>

Maxwell performed a similar bridging role for the SNP, proposing a shift in strategy whereby independence would emerge from the self-interest of the working-class Scots that were gradually being won round to devolution. In his otherwise favourable review of *The Break-up of Britain*, Maxwell criticised Nairn for the latter's detachment from Scottish circumstances:

[A] failure of historical imagination perhaps accounts for the lack of attention given to the Scottish working class. It appears only in the role of Cinderella waiting for the kiss of a bourgeois intellectual Prince Charming to arouse its populist nationalist energies. The possibility that the Scottish working class as a component of an advanced 'historic nation' might have possessed a concept of political nationalism along with sentimental nationalism seems not to have been considered.<sup>40</sup>

Maxwell's insistence on the political-nationalist potential of the Scottish working class was inextricable from the internal politics of his own party. In *The Case for Left-Wing Nationalism* and with his associates in the '79 Group he launched an assault on those Scottish nationalists who believed Scottish culture, combined with the economic interests of the Scottish bourgeoisie, would be enough to build a majority in favour of independence. 'Nationalist strategy', he wrote, 'must start by acknowledging that for easily understood reasons of history a sense of nationality exists in most Scots today only at a sentimental level remote from public affairs and political debate ... the historic sense of Scottish political and cultural nationality is too weak to serve as the basis for modern political nationalism.'<sup>41</sup> Scottish independence could only be won by re-politicising Scottish identity through an appeal to the economic and social interests of the Scottish working class, and by a shift in nationalist focus from Scotland's historic nationhood to its future needs.

For Maxwell, the crucial factor in all of this was that Scotland's *national* needs were in line with the needs of its working class, and for this he borrowed enthusiastically from Third-Worldist development theory. Describing Scotland as a 'neo-colony',<sup>42</sup> he argued that:

The SNP's credibility – with working class and middle class voters alike – depends on the party pursuing a consistent line on the key needs of the day based on an analysis of Scotland's economic and social needs. Given the collapse of the Scottish private sector and the major social and economic inequalities which persist in Scottish society, that analysis will lead to a socialist response.<sup>43</sup>

Scottish capital was too weak as a result of its dependency on external control, which 'destroyed the social and economic base in Scotland for "bourgeois nationalism"', while the country's professionals and civil servants remained intransigently and cynically unionist.<sup>44</sup>

Only the working class, with a clear interest in redistributing the wealth of a reinvigorated Scottish economy, could provide a successful social base for nationalism; and, more importantly, only nationalism could offer political success for the working class. This argument leaned heavily on a more openly nationalist insistence on the uselessness of pan-British socialist politics:

There is no prospect of Scotland's decline being reversed from a British base ... the policies of the new Labour left, based on a massive increase in centralised decision making with 'democratic' control channelled through the Labour Party itself rather than new public institutions, offer little hope to Scotland. Indeed their only certain result would be to *intensify British exploitation of Scotland's energy resources* as the left wing government, lacking a stable popular base in either the English electorate or the labour movement, faced the retaliation of the international financial agencies and the multinationals.<sup>45</sup>

For Maxwell, it is without doubt 'Scotland' that comes first, although his insistence on the unified interest of the Scottish working class and their nation makes it unnecessary to state it so openly. Brown, on the other hand, takes a slightly more agnostic approach in his introduction to the *Red Paper*:

Scottish socialists can not support a strategy for independence which postpones the question of meeting urgent and social needs until the day after independence – but nor can they give unconditional support to maintaining the integrity of the United Kingdom – and all that that entails – without any guarantee of radical social change; the question is not one of structures nor of territorial influence, but of democracy – how working people in Scotland can increase the control they have over the decisions which shape their lives and the wealth they alone produce – and in doing so aid the struggle for a shift of power to working people elsewhere.<sup>46</sup>

Brown's membership of the Labour Party made him far less willing than Maxwell to consider British socialism a busted flush; but the similarities in the two arguments say a great deal about the era. For much of the twentieth century the idea that the Scottish working class were worthy of independent consideration within British social relations was itself tantamount to outright separatism; that this consideration should result in a *constitutional* solution was even more controversial; and that such proposals might come from within the ranks of the British labour movement itself was testament to the immense transformation that occurred in the thinking of the British and Scottish left in the decades since the Second World War. This transformation in thinking had nevertheless occurred remarkably smoothly; the Labour Party remained predominant, the Communist Party remained a crucial voice in the labour movement, and Scotland remained in the union. This relatively peaceful ideological transition had been enabled by a long revolution in left-wing thought, which spanned the globe and turned orthodox ideas about the 'national question' on their head.

### Conclusion

If the UCS work-in was the defining image of class struggle in the 1970s, the miners' strike was its equivalent in the 1980s. But where Jimmy Reid was at the forefront of the former, the latter saw him decried as 'broken Reid' by Mick McGahey for criticising the conduct of the strike in the press.<sup>47</sup> From militancy to constitutionalism, Reid's trajectory aptly summarised the direction of travel of Scotland's 'left-wing' nationalism after its early 1970s genesis. Reid left the CPGB in the mid-70s and joined Labour, finally joining the SNP in the late 1990s. The change was more ideological, or rhetorical, than political; the language that came to dominate devolutionary and pro-independence politics from the 1980s onwards was a far cry from the class and conflict-oriented – even Marxist-influenced – positioning of the 1970s. If Scottish nationalism retained traces of a sort of class politics, it was in a conservative, welfarist form, protecting the state institutions that sustained workers through low-paid, insecure work in an environment of deindustrialisation and trade union demobilisation and decline. The vision of a socialist, independent Scotland 'beyond social democracy', captured in Maxwell's early essays, is missing from his later work, where he argues that Scottish nationalists ought to be 'heartened and inspired' by Tony Judt's argument that social democracy 'is better than anything else to hand'.<sup>48</sup> Gordon Brown's own journey was encapsulated by the 'Better Together' TV broadcast on the eve of the independence referendum, showing footage from throughout the labour movement's history: as the clips changed from monochrome to

colour, the politics changed from that of strikes, marches and industrial workers, to that of constitutional change and top-down legislation as the key levers of ‘social justice’.<sup>49</sup>

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## A miner cause?

### The persistence of left-nationalism in post-war Wales

*Daryl Leeworthy*

In 1947, responding to demands for greater political representation for Wales in parliament, Aneurin Bevan published an article in the journal *Wales* addressing ‘the claim of Wales’.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on the persistence, even resurgence, of Welsh national identity, he noted that amid the ‘appalling tendency of the times towards standardisation, regimentation and universal greyness’, patriotism kept the present in touch with the past and ensured flourishing diversity. But Bevan’s sense of nationhood was mediated by his commitment to – and central role in – the defining unionist project of the 1945–51 Labour governments and what he perceived to be the necessity of collective solidarity as Britons, as much as (if not more than) as English, Welsh, Scots and Northern Irish. He concluded:

Wales is different, not in the fact that she possesses coal and steel, docks and harbours, factories and an intricate web of economic activities. These are part of the common life of the United Kingdom. She is different in that she has a language of her own, and an art and a culture, and an educational system and an excitement for things of the mind and spirit, which are wholly different from England and English ways.<sup>2</sup>

From Bevan’s point of view the individual nations of the United Kingdom found expression primarily through arts and culture, a vision shared by many of his colleagues from England and Scotland.<sup>3</sup> As Daniel Williams suggests, albeit with a more negative implication than that adopted here, this culturalism enabled Bevan to make subsidiary ‘the struggles for the continued existence of Welsh distinctiveness as manifested in the spheres of language and culture’.<sup>4</sup> In other words, class came before nation, politics before culture, Britain before Wales.

Bevan’s intervention in the debate on self-determination after the Second World War was not the first time that a leading representative of the labour



movement had made the simultaneous choice to embrace Welshness as a cultural expression and reject the political implications of national identity. More than half a century earlier, during the *Cymru Fydd* agitation encouraged by liberal-nationalists such as David Lloyd George, the miners' leader and Lib-Lab MP for the Rhondda, William Abraham (Mabon), whose nationalism was frequently expressed in cultural and linguistic terms, recoiled from the political momentum towards home rule by insisting that working people should not 'subordinate every other interest to that of their nationality [...] although they were Welshmen they were also working men'.<sup>5</sup> The implication, as in Bevan's understanding, was that industrial matters were paramount, and that class and class consciousness triumphed over nation and nationalism if push came to shove. Nationalism provided a useful mechanism for projecting different voices into the imperial parliament, but could not override the essential democratic principle of working people moving forward together (irrespective of nationality) to improve their lives and to correct the negative features of industrial capitalism.

Nationalism persisted, nevertheless, and over the course of the twentieth century the politics of nation were established as the main antagonist of, and alternative to, the politics of class. Class and nation have therefore provided both the formative frameworks for political movements and been reflected in the way scholars have examined Wales. Historians working from the class-based perspectives of labour history, for instance, have tended to share the Labour Party's ambivalence towards national identity as a political force, emphasising instead regional, fragmentary dimensions in their work. In this way, Dai Smith's 'world of South Wales' insists on the social, cultural and political viability – and reality – of Wales most populous, diverse and economically significant southern counties, while at the same time problematising the very notion of 'Wales' itself.<sup>6</sup> The nationalist tradition, by contrast, proceeds from the assumption that Wales can be understood as a single unit and that for all the internal differences these are outweighed by the distinctiveness of Welsh experience. In one of the first studies of the dynamics of Wales in British politics, Kenneth Morgan drew attention to aspects of what he regarded as specifically Welsh political ideology, which came to define the nation as a political reality in the late-nineteenth century: church disestablishment, language rights and self-determination. This ideology was asserted through the Liberal Party, which claimed to speak for Wales by virtue of its electoral dominance, rather than, as was the case in Ireland, through a nationalist 'Welsh Parliamentary Party'.<sup>7</sup>

In a recent reworking of this analysis, drawing on a broad range of nineteenth-century European nationalist literature, Simon Brooks has contended that Liberalism (that is, the official political creed of the Liberal Party, rather than the broad philosophy of liberalism) did indeed articulate

the nation in political terms, but nevertheless failed to match its rhetoric with any momentum towards the creation of an independent, Welsh-speaking state.<sup>8</sup> In a similar manner, Richard Wyn Jones has argued that politics in Wales has a distinct colonial legacy. This is particularly visible in the 'one-partyism' evident before 1918 through Liberal dominance, and subsequently through the electoral strength of the Labour Party.<sup>9</sup> Given the frequency with which British elections were won by the Conservative Party, this one-partyism enabled a discourse of difference, the expression of a Welsh voice that was distinct from that of England (or Britain more generally), but no formal mechanism for the construction of an alternative state. The result was a mediated nationhood through the creation of adjuncts of otherwise British institutions (for instance a Welsh Board of Education), or unionist political parties, but also the visible decline of the language and culture that could have sustained an independent Wales.

Twentieth-century nationalist activism and thought is best understood, then, as a legacy of late-nineteenth century experience. The imprint of liberal-nationalism is evident across the political spectrum, while reaction to Anglicisation and class-based politics has enabled the development of both a right-wing and left-wing cultural and linguistic nationalism. Plaid Cymru, the nationalist party, but also the political voice of the nationalist movement, has historically straddled all three. In its earliest phase, from foundation in 1925 until the Second World War, the party was dominated by the conservatism of Saunders Lewis and influenced by the right-cultural nationalism of Catholic Europe and Ireland. This nationalism, labelled 'Petainist' by the historian Gwyn A. Williams,<sup>10</sup> led some of the party's leadership to express broad sympathy with General Franco during the Spanish Civil War, albeit in private, and to publish works that were identifiably anti-Semitic.<sup>11</sup> One consequence, together with the party's 'neutrality' during the Second World War, was the accusation, levied primarily by the Labour Party, that Plaid Cymru was the fascist party of Wales. The post-war period saw a shift towards liberal-nationalism, the political creed of Gwynfor Evans, the party president from 1945 until 1981.<sup>12</sup> Evans is best understood as the inheritor of the mantle of the Lloyd George family, both ideologically by means of connecting Evans's Plaid Cymru with the legacies of *Cymru Fydd*, and literally, in the case of Megan Lloyd George's Carmarthen constituency, which Evans won following her death in 1966.

Evans's retirement from frontline politics in 1981 saw the party shift firmly towards social democracy and, for a time, notably under the leadership of Dafydd Elis Thomas (president, 1984–91), a form of Marxism. Plaid Cymru's left turn began to develop in the late-1970s with the embrace of a much broader range of rights, notably for women, ethnic and racial minorities, and lesbians and gays, together with the necessary vocabulary, than had

previously been the case. But the clearer turn in the 1980s saw Plaid Cymru enter political territory that had been developed since the 1930s by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and a smaller number of socialist and republican movements.<sup>13</sup> Advocates of a left-nationalist position, then, had long articulated an alternative within the labour movement to Labour's unionism, and within the nationalist movement counterpoint to Plaid Cymru's instinctive liberal-nationalism. What follows examines the development of this left-nationalist position, notably the major role played by the CPGB. It points to its persistence and influence and considers the implications for our understanding of post-war leftist politics.

Two points of emphasis emerge. Firstly, that left-nationalism emerged because of concerns about the nature of the unionist project, as well as aspirations for constitutional change, and that these anxieties (or hopes) were fuelled by the consequences of unemployment in the 1930s and deindustrialisation from the 1960s onwards. The persistent strength of left-nationalism since the 1980s can be seen as a direct expression of concern about post-industrial futures. Secondly, left-nationalism undoubtedly represented a politics of grievance: it was, at various times, a protest about weakening democratic values, about the corruption, bureaucratisation and centralisation that flowed from one-partyism, and about the failure of the Labour Party (and the labour movement more broadly) to engage sufficiently quickly with the vocabularies and activism of New Left politics. Tardiness, together with economic change and worsening industrial relations, exposed Labour to accusations of having shifted to the right and become detached from its roots. Left-nationalists of various persuasions exploited such grievances to press for constitutional change and to further develop post-material identity politics.

### **‘Riding a tiger’: the CPGB and Welsh nationalism to 1979**

In June 1949, the CPGB's Executive Committee (EC) considered ‘the national question in Britain’ for the first time since the war. Led by George Thomson, Irish-speaking professor of classics at the University of Birmingham, discussion focused on policy statements on Scottish and Welsh self-determination likely to be made in the party's manifesto for the forthcoming general election.<sup>14</sup> The outcome, following further consultation with the Scottish and Welsh district committees, was a brief passage in the *Socialist Road for Britain* (1949) setting out the party's belief in self-government for Scotland and Wales, and the necessity of establishing parliaments for both nations responsible for a broad spectrum of domestic affairs. The move by the CPGB to capture this particular territory was motivated primarily by Labour's perceived abandonment of it, and a secondary electoral desire to expand the party

into rural areas. Although the Labour government did establish the quasi-devolutionary (but largely powerless) Council for Wales and Monmouthshire in 1948, and despite the pro-devolution enthusiasms of certain cabinet ministers including Jim Griffiths and Herbert Morrison, Labour's attitude was one of resistance to constitutional change. The centralising framework of its nationalisation programme and the planned economy was unionist and the party presented itself as British.

Until the 1930s, the CPGB spoke in similar terms. This was a reflection of the party's origins as the unification of several regional socialist societies and its fundamental emphasis on the development of a party base within areas of strong proletarian consciousness where national identity was voiced in cultural rather than political terms. Identifiable 'little Moscovs' were all in the southern coalfield, in villages such as Maerdy, Aberaman, Bedlinog, Abercraf and Onllwyn. By the end of the 1920s, in fact, around a fifth of all CPGB members lived in South Wales. North Wales, by contrast, had no more than a handful of members and no party organisation. This began to change with the establishment of the Bangor branch in 1935, and a district committee and a local journal *Llais y Werin* (Voice of the People) in 1937. The emergence of North Walian communism infused the national question into CPGB campaigns – as with Labour, the most vocal exponents of left-nationalism typically came from North Wales.

The key figure – and District Secretary from 1937 onwards – was John Roose Williams. A student at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, between 1925 and 1930, Williams had originally joined the fledgling Welsh Nationalist Party seeing in it the possibility of achieving both the social reform necessary to ameliorate the lives of Welsh workers and their political emancipation through independence.<sup>15</sup> But he grew frustrated with the conservatism of the nationalists and joined the CPGB in 1932, seeing in it a more amenable mechanism for bringing about radical social change. He was responsible for the North Wales district's close engagement on matters of language and nationality. Indeed, Williams's initial attempt at framing a communist response to the Welsh national question, the pamphlet *Llwybr Rhyddid y Werin* (The People's Way to Freedom), published in Welsh in 1936, was issued not by the CPGB's existing Welsh administration but by its central office in London.<sup>16</sup> As Douglas Jones suggests, this hints at the level of indifference shown to the national question by the South Wales district.<sup>17</sup>

*Llwybr Rhyddid y Werin* was an attempt to set out those aspects of CPGB policy and Marxist theory useful in appealing to non-industrial workers. It was, as Williams explained in a speech to the 1938 party congress, 'the nucleus of a national programme for Wales' and was to some extent received as such.<sup>18</sup> Welsh-language nationalist circles greeted it as an indication that

the CPGB had 'finally realised that there is such a thing as the Welsh nation'.<sup>19</sup> The following year, Idris Cox, South Wales district organiser, published his call to *Make Cardiff a Capital City*, and in 1938 the party issued its first pamphlet tailored to those attending the National Eisteddfod in Cardiff. *Lore of the People*, written by Williams, and the first pamphlet jointly issued by the North and South Wales district committees, sold as many as 10,000 copies, 6,000 of them at the Eisteddfod itself.<sup>20</sup> The pamphlet's success emboldened the nationalist wing and they submitted a resolution to the 1939 Party Congress calling for self-government, a Secretary of State, a separate Council of Education and for equality of status for the Welsh language.<sup>21</sup> The outbreak of the Second World War led to the postponement of the Congress and the resolution was never debated.

Five years later, the North and South Wales district committees merged to form the Welsh District Committee (WDC). From inception, the WDC was much more active in seeking answers to the 'national question'. Through a series of pamphlets, including *The Flame of Welsh Freedom* issued for the 1944 National Eisteddfod, the WDC sought to harness the Welsh national spirit for the Communist Party. These pamphlets insisted Wales should have its own parliament and that 'the Welsh people will have a new birth of freedom and national consciousness' in the post-war world.<sup>22</sup> Cox, likewise, used the occasion of the first All-Wales Congress in January 1945 to suggest:

Wales needs to be treated as a nation, not only to enrich its language and culture, but to develop its rich natural and mineral wealth, to increase its productive forces, to revive its agriculture and to guarantee its future prosperity.<sup>23</sup>

This spirit carried through to the 18th National Congress, held in November 1945. The nationalist wing of the WDC submitted a composite resolution demanding the immediate appointment of a Secretary of State for Wales and legislative devolution to a parliament in due course.<sup>24</sup> Although this was subsequently moderated to a 'strong urging' in the conference report, it was symptomatic of a district willing to press the case for constitutional change.<sup>25</sup> One Cardiff branch submitted a separate resolution calling for economic recognition of Wales as a single unit by designating it as a development area.<sup>26</sup> This would have maintained the model of the Welsh Reconstruction Advisory Council established in 1942. The Labour government, however, designated two development areas: one, an extension of the Special Area of the 1930s comprising the entire coalfield, the Vale of Glamorgan, and the Gower; the other centred on the industrial parts of Denbighshire and Flintshire in the north-east.

The emergence of a nationalist wing was not universally welcomed. Arthur Horner was a vocal opponent and used his address at the 1945 All-Wales

Congress to say so.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, in a resolution sent to the 19th National Congress, held in 1947, the Ebbw Vale branch recorded their view that 'the Party is making errors in theory and policy on the Welsh national question'.<sup>28</sup> Horner's intervention was a clear reflection of industrial policy and the needs and instincts of the South Wales Miners' Federation, which had battled against sectional wage agreements for decades. There was also a glaring contradiction between political separatism for Wales on the one hand and the move towards single British unions – such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) – on the other. Unionist opposition did not deter the nationalists entirely, although it probably contributed to Cox's removal as District Secretary in 1951.<sup>29</sup>

Three years earlier, to mark the centenary of the Communist Manifesto the WDC sponsored a translation into Welsh and Cox used it as the basis for developing a left-nationalist history of popular struggle.<sup>30</sup> He spoke at the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress in 1948 on the political reality of the national question.<sup>31</sup> The translation, he argued, offered essential material with which to 'combat the muddle-headed, but dangerous ideas of the Welsh Nationalists'.<sup>32</sup> Herein was a political calculation. Having nearly won the Rhondda East constituency in 1945, by the early 1950s the party had declined electorally. Cox saw the possibility of revival by challenging in districts that had yet to go over to Labour and the need to adapt campaigning strategies and languages of appeal. The testing ground was the Parliament for Wales campaign, for which Cox pledged communist support 'to the hilt'.<sup>33</sup> But outright opposition from Labour and the unwillingness of trades unions to undermine them meant few communists followed Cox's lead.<sup>34</sup> In 1952, to the surprise of no one, the CPGB's political committee were told that the campaign 'certainly hasn't caused a ripple in the broad Labour Movement in South Wales'.<sup>35</sup>

Bill Alexander's appointment as District Secretary in 1953 brought an end to nationalist flirtation.<sup>36</sup> Indicative of the change was the revision process for the 1958 edition of the *British Road to Socialism*. Although the essence of party policy remained the same, little developmental progress had been made.<sup>37</sup> The new edition drew Cox's scorn for precisely this reason. Writing in the *World News*, he thought this 'quite ludicrous' before drawing attention to the likely political price. Progressive people were migrating away from the CPGB and into the hands of Plaid Cymru.<sup>38</sup> Two years later, in 1960, Alexander was replaced by Bert Pearce whose instincts were closer to those of Cox. Nationalism was re-engaged with, initially as a reassertion of earlier positions and then with some urgency and novelty in the second half of the 1960s as Plaid Cymru appeared to be on the verge of a major breakthrough in Labour's coalfield heartlands.

Writing in *Marxism Today* in November 1967, Pearce offered a Coxian response to the rising nationalist tide and pushed for urgent action. 'The 10,000 Rhondda votes for Plaid Cymru', he wrote, 'demonstrated a profound upheaval in political attitudes'. Three reasons were identified: unequal development, the need for self-government and disillusionment with right-wing Labour policies nationally and locally.<sup>39</sup> Labour was at fault for neglecting the national question and creating a vacuum into which nationalists spread.<sup>40</sup> A few months later, Cox responded. He urged a federalist position to strengthen the unity of Britain.<sup>41</sup> Six months later, *Marxism Today* published a further reply from Pearce endorsing Cox's ideas.<sup>42</sup> But it was controversial: Cox and Pearce drew an angry reply from Bert Ward, a lecturer in politics at South East London College, who warned that 'once nationalist emotions are unleashed we will be riding a tiger'.<sup>43</sup>

By the late 1970s, Labour could no longer completely ignore the nationalist voices in its Scottish and Welsh heartlands. Having lost its slim parliamentary majority, Labour saw devolution as a means of gaining support from nationalist MPs and to ensure the government's survival. The result was the Wales Act in 1978, which was subject to an affirmative referendum. Held on 1 March 1979, this was heavily defeated. Nevertheless, Labour's cautious embrace of devolution was seized on by the CPGB. Through the Welsh district's journal *Cyffro*, the *Morning Star* and *Comment*, the Welsh committee presented a comprehensive plan for 'devolution, democratic advance, and the fight for socialism' with a Welsh Assembly elected by proportional representation.<sup>44</sup> But there was also a clear shift in vocabulary. As late as 1968, the CPGB's view of the national question was framed by rights and emphasised self-determination.<sup>45</sup> In the 1970s, however, colonial exploitation and national liberation came to the fore. In the view of one correspondent to *Cyffro*, 'people in Wales are understanding the semi-colonial status of the country and are looking for political organisations that will loosen the shackles of international capitalism'.<sup>46</sup>

This language shift was a consequence of the CPGB's vision of a 'broad popular alliance' (after 1977, the 'broad democratic alliance'), which saw the party reach out to the women's liberation movement, anti-racism and anti-Nazism campaigners, gay liberation activists and the Broad Left group within the student movement, to press for fundamental social change. Key was the triangulation of interests: those of the liberation movements, those of the CPGB and the ultimate advancement of socialism. The latter being the most important. In this way, the CPGB spoke in strongly nationalist terms but readily questioned Plaid Cymru's commitment to devolution and a radical overhaul of society. Both Plaid Cymru and the CPGB campaigned for a yes vote in the 1979 referendum, but the CPGB regarded the former's



support as ‘only an opportunity to be seized to attempt to destroy the Labour Party’.<sup>47</sup>

### After the ‘Year of the Plague’: left-nationalism since 1980

The events of 1979 shattered confidence across the Welsh left. Writing a few years later, despairing after the further shocks of the 1983 general election, Gwyn A. Williams reflected that ‘the Welsh electorate in 1979 wrote *finis* to nearly two hundred years of Welsh history’.<sup>48</sup> Splits within Labour led to the establishment of the Social Democratic Party, and within and without Plaid Cymru a more vocal – and militant – leftist bloc emerged. In contrast to earlier decades, momentum in the early 1980s was South Walian. Committed to print culture as well as activism, these small societies provided an important outlet for debate and discussion on the future of the nationalist left. Instructive in this regard was the Niclas Society. Although typically overshadowed by the Welsh Socialist Republican Movement (WSRM), the Niclas Society was nevertheless ‘strongly communist (with a small c) in persuasion and strongly Welsh in character’.<sup>49</sup> It produced a range of pamphlets, including a discussion on profits from the (then state-owned) coal mining industry, on capitalism, and, in honour of its eponymous inspiration, an edition of the political poems of T. E. Nicholas. Members were active in educational circles as well as supporting agitation against the Thatcher government and the society also had links to the Workers’ Party in Ireland.

The Irish context, especially a resurgent Sinn Féin, was of intellectual and practical importance to the WSRM, which emerged as a leftist-republican split from Plaid Cymru in January 1980. Six months earlier, at Plaid Cymru’s national conference, a motion calling for a Welsh socialist republic had been defeated, despite considerable intellectual investment from its primary movers – Robert Griffiths and Gareth Miles. In July 1979, ahead of the conference, and with support from Dafydd Elis Thomas MP, the pair published *Socialism for the Welsh People*.<sup>50</sup> For several years, Griffiths, then employed by Plaid Cymru as a research officer, sought to reconcile nationalism and Marxism. The result was a series of publications and small ginger groups within Plaid Cymru itself: initially *Triban Coch* (1974), which ‘choked on an overdose of non-class “radicalism”’, then *Y Saeth* (1976–1978), and finally *Y Faner Goch* from 1978.<sup>51</sup> In the first issue of *Y Saeth*, published in the spring of 1976, Dafydd Elis Thomas argued that Wales as a political reality, rather than cultural idea, could begin ‘organising a radically different system of social relationship’.<sup>52</sup> Writing in *Cyffro* a few years later, he took this one step further, suggesting that national liberation would enable liberation from other forms of oppression including sexism and homophobia.<sup>53</sup>



Following its establishment, the WSRM also published a string of pamphlets that were on the one hand highly critical of the mainstream left and on the other keen to set out the intellectual basis for republican socialism rooted in both a Welsh and 'Celtic' framework. In an early pamphlet tracing Labour's shifting attitudes towards nation and union, Griffiths argued that Labour could not adequately claim to be the guardian of national interests because it had abandoned its early commitment to home rule in favour of the British state.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, as Griffiths sought to demonstrate in his subsequent biography of S. O. Davies, which must be read entirely in this context, the labour movement certainly had elements within that were socialist and republican.<sup>55</sup> The point was emphasised by the group's publication in 1981 of a selection writings by former miners' leader Dai Francis, although Francis himself regarded the nationalist movement as a form of grievance politics.<sup>56</sup> As he put it in an interview with the East German newspaper *Berliner Zeitung* a few weeks before his death in March 1981, the visible growth in nationalist sentiment was really a reaction to unemployment and deindustrialisation.<sup>57</sup>

This apparent contradiction between increasing trade union militancy and continued allegiance to what left-nationalists regarded as the British state, which maintained the conditions generating the militancy in the first place, proved difficult for the members of the WSRM to reconcile. As Griffiths later reflected, the group had been over-optimistic in its assessment of popular awareness of the Welsh-British dichotomy, resulting in a reception from workers caught up in the industrial disputes of the early 1980s that was amused and sympathetic but not active and enthusiastic. More problematically, the language of oppression and colonialism, which had been embraced by large sections of left-nationalists in the 1970s, proved a pathway to less savoury ideas.<sup>58</sup> There can be little doubt that the bombing campaign carried out by the ambitiously named Workers' Army of the Welsh Republic (WAWR) between 1980 and 1982 was off-putting to potential sympathisers, although it was indicative of intellectual debts to Northern Ireland.

Another connection to WSRM, albeit seemingly as a means of communication rather than anything significant, was with the Maoist fringe. In June 1980, following the merger of the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain (RCLB) and the Communist Workers' Movement (CWM), the new organisation set out a direct critique of older communist instincts on national liberation. 'In the struggle against British Imperialism', explained the unity document published in the RCLB's newspaper *Class Struggle*, 'the RCLB has [...] criticised itself for its error in aiming to build a single communist party which would be based in Northern Ireland as well as in England, Scotland and Wales'.<sup>59</sup> Although the focus here was on the Irish struggle for independence – and for a united Ireland – there were clear indications as to the new organisation's attitudes towards national movements in the other

nations. Indeed a few months later, this was made deliberately clear through an article on the campaign for a Welsh-language television channel, which emphasised the semi-colonial relationship between the English-language and the Welsh.<sup>60</sup> And at the RCLB's congress in 1981, the party's approach to the national question was overhauled completely: no longer were Scotland and Wales recognised as 'regions' but nations with attendant recognition of national rights.<sup>61</sup> They were to be regarded as 'oppressed' within the British state and entirely at liberty to secede should their people wish to do so.<sup>62</sup>

The high-point of the RCLB and the WSRM's entanglement was a bizarre spectacle held in Abergele in July 1981. Designed to mark the deaths of two would-be terrorists (they were killed when a bomb they were carrying detonated prematurely) in 1969, the event saw a 'colour party' from the WSRM lay wreaths to the memory of the two men, and a range of speeches from leading socialist republican figures. Linking the 'struggle' in Wales with the nationalist campaign in Northern Ireland – particularly the hunger strikers – Robert Griffiths asserted the legitimacy of violence and terrorism as a means to counteract 'the English ruling class', which used 'institutionalised and overt violence to destroy the Welsh nation and shatter the Welsh working class'.<sup>63</sup> With bombing activity undertaken in early 1982, this legitimisation of violence by the WSRM was to prove their undoing. Attacks on the army recruiting office in Pontypridd, at the Welsh headquarters of British Steel in Cardiff, and at the National Coal Board's pension fund office in London, led to a concerted police effort to arrest the perpetrators and to bring an end to the WSRM's activities.<sup>64</sup> The WSRM collapsed in 1983, chiefly as a result of the actions of the police in response to the terrorist activity.

It was not terrorism so much as the events of the 1984–85 miners' strike that ultimately led to a reconsideration of devolution and Welsh self-government. Anger at the state and its agencies, notably the police, was already considerable in the run up to the strike with several clear breaches of civil liberties.<sup>65</sup> During the strike itself, nationalists were praised for their supporting role with Dafydd Elis Thomas greeted as the 'MP for the Welsh miners' rather than a Labour MP.<sup>66</sup> And in October 1984, the Wales Congress in Support of Mining Communities marked the transformation of the industrial dispute into, in the words of Raphael Samuel, a 'regional crusade'.<sup>67</sup> In the view of its chair, Hywel Francis, the Wales Congress was the starting point for the long march towards devolution.<sup>68</sup>

In the decade after 1984, the Labour Party, then led by Neil Kinnock who had fought vigorously against devolution in the 1970s, moved from making no commitments to establishing a Welsh Assembly in 1987 to an offer of a fully elected Assembly in 1992. Such a body would absorb the powers already allocated to the Secretary of State for Wales.<sup>69</sup> By the early 1990s, nationalist politics had also begun to attract other elements of the left, although the

collapse of the CPGB in 1991 removed others. The Green Party, in particular, undertook considerable debate on the relationship between nationalist politics and the ecological left both in advance of, and as a consequence of, their successful alliance with Plaid Cymru at the 1992 general election.<sup>70</sup> Whereas the start of the 1980s had been fractious, fragmented and prone to violence and small-scale terrorism, the early 1990s was a much more peaceful and productive period for the left-nationalist movement. That peace was ultimately far more effective at achieving the dream of self-government.

### Nationalism as a voice of protest

Much of the preceding discussion has focused on the development of left-nationalist policy and ideas and the manifestation of a left-nationalist politics. But the persistence of left-nationalism was made possible, ultimately, by frustration with established politics and political forms. The press viewed it initially as apathy. In Pontypridd, during the first local government elections after the Second World War, which were held in April 1946, the local newspaper complained of disengagement among voters. It was a complaint that became as regular as the elections themselves. In 1949, the paper went so far as to blame women voters: 'It would seem that Suffragettes tied themselves to railings and went on hunger strikes behind prison bars in vain.'<sup>71</sup> The *Cardiff and Suburban News* echoed that pessimism when it concluded in the aftermath of the 1951 local government elections that 'at no time was there an old-time election atmosphere'.<sup>72</sup> By the end of the decade, one election agent told the *Western Mail* bluntly that 'I am more worried about those people who do not bother to vote than I am about whether our opponents will steal a last minute march on us on polling day.'<sup>73</sup>

Two lines of thought emerged. On the one hand there was the stultifying effect of monopolised political power, evident in the number of uncontested local government wards, and the bureaucratised and increasingly corrupt nature of local administration. On the other there was the alienation of young people and women whose voices struggled to be heard in a political environment dominated by older male trade unionists. It was to the corrupt practices of local government that attention was visibly drawn by the novelist and critic Glyn Jones. His novel *The Learning Lark* (1960) focused on the way in which teachers and headteachers were appointed by Labour-controlled education committees and were thus closely tied to the political machine. The protagonist, Johnny Thomas, a progressive idealistic teacher with ambitions to become a headmaster, finds himself able to achieve that promotion without the usual process of canvassing influential members of the education committee only by marrying into a well-connected family. Similar exposures would come in due course in relation to council housing and other local

government appointments, leading one defector from Labour to Plaid Cymru to complain that 'the Labour councillors treat the council as some sort of secret society for their own benefit'.<sup>74</sup>

Nowhere was the politics of grievance felt more acutely than in Merthyr Tydfil. When, in 1976, the Labour Party lost control of Merthyr, a town it had governed since the First World War without interruption, a shockwave ran through Welsh politics.<sup>75</sup> For the first time in its history, Plaid Cymru had been given a working majority on a local authority, although this lasted only three years before they were routed. Plaid Cymru's next opportunity to run a local authority did not occur until the early 1990s when, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, they ran Taff Ely. But the reasons for victory in Merthyr exemplified the willingness of the electorate to turn away from Labour at times of open grievance. There were complaints of self-satisfied complacency and recognition of corruption, particularly in the way in which housing was allocated to would-be tenants. And there was a feeling that the ruling Labour group were not taking the town's history and heritage seriously and were being over-zealous in the name of progress.<sup>76</sup>

Corruption dogged Labour in the 1970s, although many of the issues related to the way local government operated and were more generic than specific. Nevertheless, exposés by the journal *Rebecca*, particularly in its corruption supplement, led to the imprisonment of numerous Labour politicians and sympathetic businessmen, including two leaders of Swansea council. A similar campaign within Swansea itself, triggered by the publication, in 1977, of the *Swansea Mafia* by the Swansea Solidarity anarchist group contributed to criminal cases against five councillors. Pressure was sustained by the underground anarchist newspaper *Alarm* and in 1979 the group responsible for writing and publishing *Alarm* ran several candidates in the local elections.<sup>77</sup> Although neither were focused on a left-nationalist politics, both *Rebecca* and the anarchist movement brought into the public domain a number of areas where one-partyism and the functions of government in Wales had putrefied. The evidence was sufficient to prompt new thoughts and new ideas about government. Therein lay a golden opportunity for the left-nationalists to bring about some of the changes they desired, although internal factionalism and distractions through bombing campaigns, meant they were never quite able to make the most of it and Labour was able to recover.

Grievance politics also brought to the fore new opportunities to appeal to those who did not find Labour an attractive proposition. Labour had always been seen as a primarily male party: the Conservatives were generally better able to reach out to women. Plaid Cymru proved themselves equally adept. Branches of the party were more gender balanced than Labour ones and there was greater representation of women on branch committees and

in officer positions. Although women's leadership of Labour branches and constituency parties was not unknown, and in places such as Pontypridd occurred relatively early in the party's development, Labour had long struggled to appeal to women as easily as it had to working men, and women were under-represented in Labour's administrative structures.<sup>78</sup> The contrast with Plaid Cymru after the Second World War was considerable. As early as 1950, the Plaid Cymru branch in Aberdare had a woman chair, reflecting the majority women membership.<sup>79</sup> When the Porth branch was established in November 1967, both chair and secretary were women. In the nearby Rhondda ward branch in Pontypridd, which was established a few weeks earlier, a majority of the officers on the committee were women. And in Treorchy, the vice chair even offered to step down from the committee to 'avoid a preponderance of women officers'. Her offer was rejected.<sup>80</sup>

There was a similar trend among young people. All political parties worried about the alienation of young people from the political process and the reasons for it. In the words of one Rhondda branch of the Labour Party, young people were not getting involved in party work because they either found politics dull or were put off by the 'disdainful attitude of many of the older members'.<sup>81</sup> Before the Second World War, branches had turned to sport as a possible means of attracting young people, largely leaving youth branches to organise themselves. But after the war, the party sought an alternative approach, seeking instead to educate themselves about the desires and aspirations of young people. In Pontypridd, the sitting MP, Arthur Pearson, told his colleagues that 'we must educate ourselves' as to the interests and needs of the emerging generation, but most of them refused to listen to his plea. They believed in the traditional model of branch development, which entailed a 'wait-your-turn' mentality: the loudest and most influential voices were those who had been around the longest.<sup>82</sup> Pearson himself was heckled by younger party members who called on him to resign because of his 'right-wing views'.<sup>83</sup> Similar complaints were made in the Gower constituency, where veteran David Rhys Grenfell was labelled out of touch by younger members of his local party.<sup>84</sup> By the 1960s, some young radicals in Pontypridd, the Rhondda and Aberdare had abandoned Labour altogether and formed or joined branches of Plaid Cymru.<sup>85</sup> They were not alone. By the late 1960s, just under half of all members in Monmouthshire branches of Plaid Cymru were under eighteen.<sup>86</sup>

Gender representation, alienation of young people from traditional political processes, and the stagnation of the Labour Party all contributed to an atmosphere of, and appetite for, change. If the success of left-nationalist groups in tapping into this politics of grievance might be called into question, what is clear is that the major victim (at times through its own connivance) was the Labour Party. Labour also suffered from shifting attitudes within

its trade union base: the emergence of industrial militancy within the mining industry after 1969, greater numbers of young people working in the mining industry (after several decades of relative decline), and the growth of education classes, which restored knowledge of forms of labour agitation and organisation that were not based on the state, all pointed to a different kind of politics within Labour as well. This was not entirely unique to Wales, although the effects were undoubtedly idiosyncratic. Indeed, such cultural encounters between what might be regarded as the 'old left' and the 'new' within the Labour Party occurred in Scotland, which had a nascent nationalist movement, and in the north of England, which absolutely did not.

### Conclusion

The complexities of left-nationalism in Wales can only be sketched in a chapter of this length, and the preceding narrative presents a partial picture of the many different influences and intellectual currents. One notable casualty is the National Left, the left-nationalist group within Plaid Cymru and around Dafydd Elis Thomas in the early 1980s. In parts of North Wales, the National Left movement developed its own version of the communist 'Broad Left', using the *Radical Wales* magazine as the starting point. Discussion groups in towns such as Blaenau Ffestiniog brought together nationalists, communists, trade unionists and Labour Party members, to debate and to consider the way forward for left-nationalists. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw some concrete conclusions from the preceding narrative. Clearly it is insufficient to seek to understand the changing nature – and the persistence – of left-nationalism through Plaid Cymru alone. The CPGB was a formative influence, indeed perhaps the most consistent group of activists came from its ranks.

A second observation is that left-nationalism took several different turns before the 1980s with a clear geographical shift from North Wales to South Wales, from a largely Welsh-speaking region to a predominantly Anglicised one, taking place. The most significant of these chronological break points was in the 1930s, when communist understanding of the national question first emerged. Plaid Cymru's 'catch up' between 1974 and 1984 can only be properly understood by tracing the earlier current. Spurred on by ideas, manifested in new movements, and given force through a politics of grievance, the partial embrace of a nationalist perspective has provided a remarkable consistency in political debate. Although the twentieth century has tended to be seen as a period of class politics, with the broad divide between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, between the haves and have-nots, the persistence of a nationalist position has always enabled an alternative dynamic: union versus nation.

And yet, for all the potential of that otherwise political mode, the other great persistence of post-war Wales, the Labour Party, ensured that nation versus union remained secondary to class politics. For so long as an industrial solution to capitalism was sought alongside a political one, Labour could ignore left-nationalist voices. The miners were part of a British trade union, worked for a British coal board, and were represented by a British Labour Party, all of which had been developed before the Second World War in the context of hostility to sectional agreements and sectional interests. That, in the end, was why left-nationalism was a minor interest. Defeat of the NUM in March 1985, however, ended the possibility of an industrial solution to capitalism. Activists turned to international affairs, to Nicaragua, anti-apartheid and nuclear disarmament, to combating Thatcherism and local authority spending cuts. And Labour turned to embrace the nationalism it had avoided for so long.

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## The British radical left and Northern Ireland during the ‘Troubles’

*Daniel Finn*

From 1968 onwards, Northern Ireland was wracked by political violence: over 3,500 people would die in what was by far the bloodiest conflict in Western Europe since 1945. Adjusted for population size, the casualty figures bear comparison with combined American losses from Union and Confederacy alike during the Civil War. Most British politicians saw (or affected to see) the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ as an unfortunate and exasperating mess, fuelled entirely by sectarian hatred between unionist and nationalist communities, even as they made their own ample contribution to the violence. But outside the political mainstream, many left-wing activists – including some who would become prominent national figures – took a keen interest in Northern Irish affairs and sought to influence the course of events themselves. Britain’s radical left was capable of exerting such influence along two separate tracks: through its impact on British politics – the British labour movement in particular – and through its contacts with Irish republicanism and the Irish far left. This chapter will explore both strands of influence across the period from the 1960s to the 1980s.

### Desmond Greaves and the Connolly Association

One way of telling the story is to begin with the role of Desmond Greaves, the historian and biographer of James Connolly. Born in Liverpool, Greaves spent most of his life in London, where he was a long-standing member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) – retaining his party card after the events of 1956, unlike many CPGB historians. He was also the driving force behind the Connolly Association, a group that had been formed by Irish emigrants in the 1940s, and edited its newspaper, the *Irish Democrat*, for many years. The CPGB’s Ireland expert Thomas Jackson – author of a

pioneering Marxist history of the island – had done much to shape Greaves' thinking on the Irish question. Jackson had argued in 1947 that 'the English and the Irish common people, each with its own splendid record of unyielding resistance to oppression, should, by rights, understand each other better than they do, and be more ready than they have been to act in concert'.<sup>1</sup> With that injunction before him, Greaves worked tirelessly in the British labour movement to promote the cause of Irish unity, and to highlight the repressive practices of the Unionist government in Northern Ireland. As he wrote in a CPGB pamphlet that was published on the eve of the Troubles:

The British people have no right, and should not wish to have right, to insist that Northern Ireland should remain a part of the United Kingdom. But they have the right to insist that while it does remain a part of the United Kingdom it shall be constitutionally compelled to afford the same level of civil liberties as exists in the rest of the UK and that it shall be free to leave the UK.<sup>2</sup>

In the early 1960s, Greaves campaigned alongside Fenner Brockway's Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF) and the Labour MPs Paul Rose and Stanley Orme. Rose later became the chief spokesperson of the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster (CDU), a pressure group of backbench Labour MPs, while Orme would serve as a junior minister in the Northern Ireland Office under Harold Wilson in the 1970s. At the behest of Greaves, the MCF passed a motion in 1962 calling for a 'complete overhaul of the system of administration of justice in the Six Counties'.<sup>3</sup> The Connolly Association and the CDU drew attention to a clause in the Government of Ireland Act that gave the Westminster parliament jurisdiction over the Northern Irish assembly at Stormont. Greaves argued that London could impose civil rights legislation on the regional government, obliging it to repeal the controversial Special Powers Act, end the gerrymandering of local councils and address discrimination against the Catholic minority in housing and employment.

The election of a Labour government in 1964 raised expectations that Harold Wilson would act in line with the promptings of Greaves and the CDU. But Wilson, preoccupied with economic turbulence and the Rhodesian crisis, was reluctant to involve himself too deeply in Northern Irish affairs. The Labour leader had no great sympathy for unionism, and found the bloc of Unionist MPs at Westminster irritating – especially between 1964 and 1966, when his government possessed a slender majority in parliament.<sup>4</sup> He preferred, however, to trust in the new Stormont Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill, who liked to cultivate a progressive, modernising image. O'Neill's overtures to the Catholic minority did not stretch much further than photo-ops with nuns and well-publicised meetings with the Irish Taoiseach and Fianna Fáil leader, Seán Lemass. He took no action to address the discriminatory

practices of the Northern Irish system, as Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson have noted:

[O'Neill] went out of his way to point out that no changes were contemplated in the field of discrimination. In February 1964 he strongly rebutted charges of 'apartheid' in Northern Ireland. In March 1966 he described such accusations as 'facile'. In January 1967 he advised his supporters to 'forget jargon words ... like community relations', while in April 1967 he described the views of the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster as 'baseless and scurrilous'.<sup>5</sup>

With Wilson not prepared to intervene, and no sign of reform being handed down from above, the focus shifted to agitation for civil rights within Northern Ireland. Once again, the influence of Desmond Greaves and the Connolly Association could be felt. Greaves had recruited two young Irish emigrants, Anthony Coughlan and Roy Johnston, to the Association; when they returned to Ireland, they brought with them the conviction that a civil rights campaign could destabilise the Unionist system.<sup>6</sup> Greaves remained in touch with Coughlan and Johnston from his London base. While the historian believed that his protégés should work with the Irish communist movement, they quickly moved into the orbit of the IRA and its new chief of staff, Cathal Goulding.<sup>7</sup>

Goulding had taken the reins in 1962 after the collapse of the Border Campaign, the IRA's most ambitious challenge to British rule in Northern Ireland since the 1920s. Having observed the campaign from a British jail, Goulding had avoided the taint of failure, and was one of the few experienced men available who was ready to assume leadership of the republican movement. From a working-class Dublin family, a childhood friend of the playwright Brendan Behan, Goulding was far more than a conventional Irish nationalist. His sympathy for left-wing ideology was clear, and he wanted to strengthen the political thinking of the IRA and its public face, Sinn Féin. Goulding encouraged the formation of discussion groups known as the Wolfe Tone Societies: Coughlan and Johnston both took part in the societies, and Johnston would go on to join the IRA as director of education, while remaining aloof from its military activities.<sup>8</sup>

The most striking manifestation of the IRA's political turn north of the Irish border was its role in the emerging civil rights movement. By the time the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was founded in February 1967, the call for republicans to launch a civil rights campaign had been set out clearly in the movement's newspaper, the *United Irishman*:

The Unionists should be squeezed by popular demands from the disenfranchised, the gerrymandered, the discriminated against, the oppressed Catholic and nationalist minority within the North itself, demands for reforms, for civil rights, for genuine democracy and opportunities of free political expression

... the policy of republicans must be to ensure that everything is done to make this demand strong, vigorously organized, widespread, well-expressed and heard not only in the North itself, but in Britain and throughout the world ... civil rights, electoral reform, an end to gerrymandering and to discrimination in housing, jobs and appointments, the legal banning of incitement to religious discrimination. These are the essential demands for the present time.<sup>9</sup>

Republicans took part in the conference that established NICRA, alongside moderate nationalists, liberals and the Communist Party of Northern Ireland (CPNI). Betty Sinclair of the CPNI became the new organisation's first chairperson.

### **The rebirth of Irish Trotskyism**

As NICRA took to the streets from the summer of 1968, challenging the authority of the 'Orange state', the influence of Desmond Greaves and his protégés was complemented by that of another current derived from Britain's Marxist left. Irish Trotskyism had been revived in the 1960s, thanks largely to the efforts of Gerry Lawless, an IRA veteran who joined the far-left milieu in London, where he founded the Irish Workers' Group. Among his recruits were Eamonn McCann and Michael Farrell, two young northerners who would be centrally involved in civil rights agitation.<sup>10</sup> When Farrell returned to Northern Ireland, he set up the Young Socialist Alliance, which would supply the 'hard core' – in Farrell's own words – of People's Democracy (PD), a ginger group on the far left of the civil rights movement that was launched by Queen's University students towards the end of 1968.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Eamonn McCann brought together a coterie of young leftists and republicans in Derry, Northern Ireland's second-largest city, where an overwhelmingly Catholic and nationalist population was ruled by a Unionist council thanks to the manipulation of electoral boundaries. McCann and his allies worked through the local branch of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, giving it an unusually radical temper, and sought to mobilise the city's working class, Catholic and Protestant alike, under the banner of the Derry Housing Action Committee.<sup>12</sup>

NICRA began its campaign of street agitation with a march from Coalisland to Dungannon in August 1968. The Derry radicals saw an opportunity to challenge the Unionist administration of their city, and secured NICRA's agreement to a demonstration on 5 October 1968; crucially, the march route would bring it through the town centre, traditionally considered 'off-bounds' for non-unionist processions by the authorities. When the Home Affairs Minister William Craig banned the marchers from entering this forbidden zone, McCann and his comrades successfully pushed for defiance of his

order. Televised footage of police officers wading into the crowd with batons helped transform the civil rights campaign into a mass movement, virtually overnight.

People's Democracy was formed by students in Belfast at a mass meeting soon after the Derry march. As one of its early members recalled, Michael Farrell 'had, from October [1968] onwards, a tremendous impact on the PD, by his consistent explanations of the best method of attacking the evils of society'.<sup>13</sup> Farrell and PD would soon find themselves occupying centre stage in the politics of Northern Ireland. The events in Derry had put Terence O'Neill's government under intense pressure to make some gestures towards the civil rights campaign. O'Neill wanted to replace the homeowners' franchise for local government elections with universal suffrage, bringing Northern Ireland into line with British practice, but was overruled by his cabinet. Instead, he came out with a more limited reform package, and urged NICRA to suspend its campaign of street marches. The civil rights body agreed to do so for the time being.

The young student radicals, however, were keen to maintain the pressure on O'Neill. Bernadette Devlin summarised their response to his programme in the following terms:

To begin with these were not reforms, but suggestions for reform. There was no commitment to the principle of one man, one vote. Nor was there any promise to deal with the basic problems of unemployment and bad housing. And the Special Powers Act remained on the statute book ... with nothing more than half-promises that all would be well, and with this noxious Act still on our backs, we – the students – didn't feel anything had been achieved: we felt we'd been sold down the river.<sup>14</sup>

With this perspective in mind, People's Democracy decided to break the agitational 'truce' agreed to by NICRA and organised a march from Belfast to Derry at the end of 1968, modelling their efforts on the US civil rights demonstration from Selma to Montgomery that had been called by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1965. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) provided a limited escort for the young activists as they made their way through rural Ulster, frequently directing them away from their intended route. But the RUC was unable or unwilling to stop a well-planned ambush near the village of Burntollet. The marchers were attacked with cudgels and iron bars by a loyalist mob that had been marshalled by Ronald Bunting, a close associate of the militant preacher Ian Paisley. They limped their way into Derry, where the RUC marked the conclusion of the march with a police riot in the city's Catholic ghetto, described by the Insight team of the *Sunday Times* as 'a night in which groups of burly RUC men



roamed through the [Catholic] Bogside, crashing from time to time into tiny terrace houses and even into a department store, dealing out arbitrary “punishment” with their batons’.<sup>15</sup>

These events largely discredited Terence O’Neill’s reformist pretensions and sharpened hostility between nationalists and the RUC. A second incursion by RUC officers into the Bogside in April 1969 saw members of the force break into a private home and assault the residents, one of whom later died. With tensions now close to boiling-point, a loyalist march through Derry’s city centre in August was greeted by local youths throwing stones. RUC officers charged into the Bogside *en masse*, only to be met with a hail of petrol bombs and other missiles. NICRA began organising protests elsewhere in Northern Ireland to take the heat off Derry. Clashes between nationalists and the police in Belfast sparked off inter-communal rioting; by the time order was restored, almost 2,000 families – 80 per cent of them Catholic – had been forced from their homes. Harold Wilson responded to the violence in Derry and Belfast by sending in the British Army for what was intended to be a short-term intervention.

### From civil rights to civil war

It would be another three decades before something approaching normality returned to Northern Ireland. The Army settled down for one of its longest missions, fighting republican guerrillas on the backstreets of West Belfast and the country lanes of South Armagh. More than 3,000 people would die in the conflict; half of those casualties were inflicted by a new organisation, the Provisional IRA, which broke with Cathal Goulding’s movement in the autumn of 1969 and began making preparations for a full-blown insurgency. The Provisionals – or ‘Provos’ for short – accused Goulding and his allies of running down the IRA as a military force by concentrating on political activity. British government policy created the ideal conditions for the new movement to gain support. Politicians in London were determined to preserve the regional administration as a buffer that would protect them from having to assume full responsibility for Northern Irish affairs. By the time this policy was abandoned in the spring of 1972, Northern Ireland was fast becoming ungovernable. Nationalist communities had come to view the British Army as an occupying force that was carrying out the instructions of the Unionist Party to restore ‘law and order’ and put them in their place. Recruitment to the Provos had sky-rocketed; by the end of 1972, almost 500 people had been killed in the space of twelve months, including more than 100 soldiers.

This downwards spiral began in earnest in July 1970, when the Army launched a search for arms on Belfast’s Lower Falls Road. The Lower Falls



was a stronghold of Goulding's Official IRA, and its volunteers were drawn into a shoot-out with British troops; a curfew was imposed, the area was doused in CS gas and dozens of homes were ransacked. Four civilians had been killed by the time the curfew was lifted, and relations between nationalists and the Army were in freefall. By the spring of 1971, the Provos felt ready to launch attacks on British soldiers, in tandem with a bombing campaign directed against commercial targets that claimed many civilian lives. In August 1971, London bowed to pressure from the Unionist Prime Minister Brian Faulkner to impose internment without trial of republican suspects. This merely added fuel to the fire and was followed by a dramatic escalation of violence. When British paratroopers opened fire on a demonstration against internment in January 1972, killing thirteen civilians, nationalist anger reached fever-pitch on both sides of the Irish border. Propping up Stormont was no longer a viable stance for the British authorities, and Faulkner's government was given its marching orders a month later, to be replaced by direct rule from London. It was too late to stop the Provos, however: their war would continue for the next quarter of a century.

For a time, events in Northern Ireland attracted great interest on the European Left. Many looked at the struggle against British rule through the prism of anti-colonialism: the Italian far-left group Lotta Continua summed up this viewpoint with its pamphlet *Ireland: Europe's Vietnam*. But the sectarian conflict between Catholic and Protestant communities that developed alongside the confrontation between republicans and the British Army posed a challenge to this analysis, as Geoffrey Bell pointed out in 1976:

The Northern Ireland situation has a particular relevance to the Marxist Left because the state has suffered the type of political crisis Marxists dream of – barricades in the streets, large sections of the population engaged in armed struggle against the state, communities running themselves, and what seemed to be a colonial situation straight out of the nineteenth century. But since the growth of the Provisionals, Marxists, in Britain especially, have lost a good deal of their enthusiasm for the 'Irish struggle'. The spectacle of worker fighting worker does not readily fit into the traditional Marxist scheme of workers uniting to overthrow capitalism.<sup>16</sup>

Divisions among Irish republicans added to the confusion. The split between Official and Provisional IRAs was widely seen as a left–right divide when it became public knowledge. The Officials declared their allegiance to Marxism, while the Provos were happy to indulge in McCarthyite rhetoric: the first edition of their newspaper *An Phoblacht* attributed the IRA's political turn in the 1960s to the influence of 'Red agents' who had 'infiltrated' the movement and 'brainwashed' its volunteers.<sup>17</sup> But the republican schism also became entangled with the question of armed struggle. The Official IRA

called a ceasefire in May 1972, warning that political violence would exacerbate sectarian hatreds and urging the Provos to follow their example.<sup>18</sup>

### **The IMG and republicanism**

One of Britain's main Trotskyist organisations, the International Marxist Group (IMG), paid especially close attention to what was happening on the neighbouring island. The IMG was affiliated to the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI), the largest surviving fragment of Trotsky's movement. The USFI was then preoccupied by the question of guerrilla warfare, with some of its Latin American sections transforming themselves into armed groups.<sup>19</sup> Influenced by this perspective, Irish supporters of the USFI became involved with a republican splinter group, Saor Éire.

A 1972 pamphlet by the IMG's Bob Purdie took a pessimistic view of Saor Éire's prospects: according to Purdie, 'the need for a secret military organization has eliminated any but the most token open political work'; Saor Éire was 'publicly known mainly for bank robberies' and remained 'essentially marginal to the Irish struggle'.<sup>20</sup> The pamphlet was dedicated to the memory of Peter Graham, a young electrician from Dublin who had become the leader of the USFI's Irish section. Graham was found murdered in his Dublin flat in October 1971; his funeral was attended by Tariq Ali of the IMG, who gave an oration from the graveside. On the far left, government agents were generally blamed for the killing at the time.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Graham had most likely been the victim of his own Saor Éire 'comrades' in a dispute over access to weapons. The organisation had attracted a group of desperados who went on to become largely apolitical bank robbers; although Graham's killers have never been publicly identified, they are generally believed to have come from this element.<sup>22</sup> Graham's death accelerated the demise of Saor Éire.

Bob Purdie went on to contribute a series of articles to the Provo newspaper *Republican News* in 1974–75, analysing the strategy of the British state in Northern Ireland. This was not the last time that a member of the IMG would be enlisted to write for the Provisionals. A new leadership team grouped around Gerry Adams took control of the Provisional IRA in the late 1970s. Adams and his comrades began to make greater use of left-wing rhetoric, and gave a platform in *Republican News* to the IMG's Phil Shimeld, whose articles were published under the name Peter Dowling. The 'old guard' Provo leaders who had been displaced by Adams were infuriated by this practice, and compared Shimeld to Cathal Goulding's advisor Roy Johnston.<sup>23</sup>

### **Militarism or mass action**

Support for the Provos was by no means unanimous on the far-left scene. Gerry Foley, an Irish-American Trotskyist who had spent time in Ireland

and befriended several Official IRA leaders, insisted that armed struggle would prove to be a dead-end, for the Irish movement in particular and for the USFI in general.<sup>24</sup> Foley welcomed the Official IRA ceasefire when it was called: 'The retaliatory strikes of the Official IRA have not helped to further the struggle of the nationalist population ... instead these actions have helped the imperialists and the Catholic "moderates" to split and demobilize the nationalist population.'<sup>25</sup> A member of the Socialist Workers Party, the USFI's American section, Foley polemicised against the orientation towards guerrilla warfare in a pamphlet based on the Irish experience, *The Test of Ireland*. He rejected the IMG's line of support for the Provo campaign, arguing that its effect had been to undermine mass civil resistance and strengthen the British position in Northern Ireland. A short-lived Provo ceasefire in 1972 had been followed by a major bombing blitz that climaxed in 'Bloody Friday', when twenty-one bombs were detonated in Belfast's city centre, killing seven civilians and wounding more than 130. Foley saw this as evidence of the futility of militarism:

The results of 'Bloody Friday' were quick in coming. Confused and disoriented by the seemingly senseless and bloody bombings, the Catholic population accepted British occupation of the 'no-go areas'. Key neighbourhoods that had been kept free of the repressive forces for months, that had served as political focuses and symbols of the resistance as well as refuges for the victims of political persecution, were occupied without resistance. Once the mass mobilization and the political pressures that had kept the British Army out were dissipated by the bombings, the 'guerrillas' were no obstacle to the Army moving in. Derry in particular, which had been nerve centre and political laboratory of the Northern resistance, the symbol of its hopes, where the Catholic population lived in freedom behind the barricades during the greater part of the crisis, fell under crushing military occupation. There was only a feeble glimmer of the spirit and unity that had defeated the British Army in the aftermath of the internment raids.<sup>26</sup>

The thread of Foley's arguments was later picked up by People's Democracy, which had survived the onset of the Troubles as a small far-left group moving towards Leninism and chiefly active around issues related to the northern conflict.<sup>27</sup> Like the IMG, PD had supported the Provo campaign during the mid-1970s, but changed direction after an internal crisis at the beginning of 1976. Warning that 'armed struggle which is not backed by the masses cannot make a revolution', PD called for broad campaigning alliances against British policy that would not be confined to supporters of the Provisional IRA: 'Violent actions are largely irrelevant in the absence of a mass movement and detract from the building of such a movement. There was a tendency in our organization and in the left generally to avoid such criticism but elitist action without a mass movement is an act of despair and shows contempt for the masses.'<sup>28</sup>

PD's new platform brought it closer to the USFI's Irish section, the Movement for a Socialist Republic (MSR), which had been formed out of the wreckage of Saor Éire. The two groups merged in 1978. US author Kevin Kelley gave the following estimate of the organisation's strength at the end of the 1970s:

People's Democracy did not have a very large membership – probably about 250 people in the North would have considered themselves strong supporters – but its activists were among the most dedicated outside of [Provisional] Sinn Féin in the nationalist communities. PD enjoyed a degree of respect and influence disproportionate to its numbers because, unlike other small leftist sects, it was not overbearingly doctrinaire and it did place great stress on the need to build a broad radical movement.<sup>29</sup>

The ideas put forward by People's Democracy in the late 1970s would have an impact well beyond the small far-left milieu. Labour's Northern Ireland Secretary Merlyn Rees had stripped republican prisoners of their 'special category' status in 1976; from now on, those convicted of paramilitary offences would receive the same treatment as violent offenders in the rest of the United Kingdom. IRA and INLA prisoners began a long protest against the new regime, refusing to wear prison uniform or cooperate with the authorities. They appealed for support from the nationalist population outside the jails. But efforts to build a solidarity campaign were hamstrung for several years by the insistence of the Provisionals that any such campaign would also have to support the 'armed struggle'.

PD saw the battle against 'criminalisation' in Long Kesh and other prisons as an issue around which the mass movement of the early 1970s could be rebuilt. Its arguments were echoed by the former civil rights MP Bernadette Devlin – now better known by her married name, McAliskey. McAliskey had drifted away from People's Democracy after being elected to Westminster, but remained close to its thinking in many respects, and was an influential figure in republican and leftist circles (although she had lost her Westminster seat in 1974). At the beginning of 1978, McAliskey and her supporters organised an 'Anti-Repression Conference' in Coalisland, hoping to expand the campaign in support of the prisoners. Gerry Adams later admitted that the Provos had been the main obstacle to such efforts:

Lack of experience and lack of preparation on our part resulted in this Coalisland conference becoming a lost opportunity to build unity, because the price our representatives asked for that unity was that all within the front should express support for the armed struggle. Part of the impact of our conspiratorial background was that we were temperamentally and organizationally disinclined to engage in any form of action with elements outside the movement itself ... what we were slowly and unevenly realizing was that one

could not build a political intervention on the basis of conspiratorial methods ... members were increasingly coming into contact with organizations that expressed a position of 'critical support' for the IRA, and any republican was bound to feel that one either supported the IRA or one did not; 'critical support' seemed a contradiction in terms and a dishonest one at that. It took a maturing process on the part of republicans to appreciate that a position of critical support was better than one of not supporting at all.<sup>30</sup>

When Bernadette McAliskey ran as an independent candidate in the 1979 European election on a platform supporting the prisoners, the Provos actively campaigned against her (Derry IRA commander Martin McGuinness even followed McAliskey around the Bogside with a megaphone denouncing her campaign). But this sectarian approach was finally abandoned by the Provisional leadership at the end of 1979 with the launch of a 'Smash H-Block' alliance that was open to anyone who supported the demands of the prisoners, regardless of what view they took of the Provo insurgency.<sup>31</sup> Without this preliminary work, the two hunger republican strikes of 1980–81 would never have had such a profound impact on Irish, British and international politics. According to the RUC, there were at least 1,200 protests in Northern Ireland during the 1981 strike, attended by over 350,000 people.<sup>32</sup> F. Stuart Ross, who has written the most comprehensive account of the campaign, suggests that the mobilisation of 1980–81 'dwarfed that of 1968 and 1969'.<sup>33</sup> The subsequent rise of Provisional Sinn Féin as a major electoral force stemmed from this upsurge of popular protest.

### **Sinn Féin and the Labour left**

By the time Gerry Adams was elected to Westminster in 1983 as Sinn Féin's MP for West Belfast, the rise of the Labour Left in Britain had opened up a promising new line of advance for republicans. In the 1970s, support for the 'troops out' demand had largely been confined to the Trotskyist left outside the Labour Party. But figures like Ken Livingstone were now bringing such ideas into the political mainstream. In an interview with Michael Farrell for *Magill* magazine following his electoral victory, Adams took note of these developments: 'We are making an effort to develop contacts with people with influence in the British Labour Party ... Ken Livingstone thinks there may be a big swing to the Left and the party might eventually come to power committed to withdrawing from Ireland.'<sup>34</sup> Livingstone was then the leader of the Greater London Council, Europe's largest municipal authority, in which capacity he had sparked tabloid fury by inviting Adams and his close ally Danny Morrison to visit the British capital (*The Sun* denounced Livingstone as 'the most odious man in Britain' for his views on the Northern Irish conflict). He argued strongly for Labour to commit itself to pulling

out of Northern Ireland: 'We have to go into an election pledged to withdrawal within two years. That's the maximum time you can allow for a transition based on a negotiated disengagement.'<sup>35</sup>

There was common ground between the newly politicised Provisional movement and Labour's left-wing current, in addition to their shared analysis of the conflict as the product of British rule. Adams and his allies had steered the Provos to the left (at least in terms of rhetoric), inspiring hopes that Sinn Féin might become an effective vehicle for socialist politics in Ireland. The Derry Trotskyist Eamonn McCann noted in 1980 that 'today's Provo activists – because of the circumstances of the IRA's rebirth in Belfast – are the first generation of Republican fighters to come overwhelmingly from the working class, and it shows'.<sup>36</sup> In a book aimed at British socialists that was published in 1984, Geoffrey Bell gave an optimistic reading of the party's recent transformation: 'There is no organization in Western Europe as far to the left as the Provisionals who can still boast their kind of mass support. Marxists who complain of the Provisionals' lack of programmatic clarity should bear this in mind ... it is an organization which is evolving, and no-one can be sure where that evolution will cease.'<sup>37</sup> The same optimism prompted some long-time PD activists to join Sinn Féin, hoping that they could push it further down this road.

The window of opportunity presented by Labour's inner-party struggles began to close, however, as the left-wing insurgency was contained and defeated by the party's centre-right leadership. In 1986, Tony Benn and Eric Heffer presented a document to the Labour National Executive that included the following statement: 'The violence in Northern Ireland, caused by the partition, can only be resolved by negotiating the termination of British jurisdiction in the Six Counties, and plans will need to be drawn up to secure this objective without any unionist veto.'<sup>38</sup> There would be no question of a future Labour government putting such ideas into practice, however: the balance of forces inside the party had already shifted decisively against Benn and his supporters. Labour would soon discard any commitment to Irish unity, along with public ownership, nuclear disarmament and other key planks of the left-wing agenda.

A study of the Northern Irish economy by Bob Rowthorn and Naomi Wayne that was published in 1988 proved to be the last hurrah for the 'troops out' slogan in the British labour movement. Rowthorn and Wayne set out a detailed blueprint for a managed British withdrawal that would prevent a sectarian 'blood-bath' from occurring:

Britain should withdraw in a planned and orderly fashion, using its considerable economic power simultaneously to undermine any Protestant resistance and to smooth the transition to a united Ireland. Were Britain to act in this responsible manner, then the risk of a widespread blood-bath would be reduced

to become almost negligible. During the actual transition process, there would almost certainly be some sectarian killings, but, it must be stressed, these already occur in Northern Ireland under present conditions. The risk of a short spate of such killings would have to be weighed against the absolute certainty that hundreds, or even thousands will die if Britain remains in Northern Ireland, and countless more will suffer in other ways.<sup>39</sup>

The only likely agent of this programme would have been a left-wing Labour government. But by the time Tony Blair assumed the leadership of the party in 1994, its support for the Union was as firmly entrenched as that of the Conservatives. Sinn Féin would retain friendly ties with left-wing Labour MPs such as Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell into the 1990s and beyond, while quietly abandoning the notion that they might be able to secure the withdrawal of British troops.

### **Sinn Féin's drift from socialism to neoliberalism**

With the prospects for left-wing advance fading in Britain and elsewhere, the Adams leadership recalibrated the Sinn Féin programme, shelving the quasi-Marxist rhetoric of the late 1970s and early 1980s in favour of an emphasis on pan-nationalist unity. Adams had concluded that the IRA campaign was going nowhere and that it was time to begin winding down the Provisional war machine in favour of an exclusively political strategy. The story of the Northern Irish peace process, and the reassessment of Provo ideology that made it possible, has often been told. Less attention has been paid to the class dimension of this mutation. When Sinn Féin began its electoral rise in the 1980s, party spokesmen had often presented it as the mouthpiece of an excluded Catholic working class whose voices had been smothered by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the dominant nationalist organisation, whose representatives tended to be middle-class professionals. Now Adams sought to play down such questions: 'The emergence of Sinn Féin may have unnecessarily brought out some of the class differences between ourselves and the SDLP leadership ... it might have been better in this phase of the independence struggle if there could have been some kind of general unity, in which both parties would agree to disagree on social and economic issues and maximize pressure on points of agreement.'<sup>40</sup>

This meant that socialism would be put on the backburner for an indefinite period. Adams dismissed 'the ultra-left view ... which breaks up the unity of the national independence movement by putting forward "socialist" demands that have no possibility of being achieved until real independence is won'. All true socialists would have to support the IRA's demand for British withdrawal – 'the acid test of commitment to socialism in Ireland (and in Britain as well) is to be found in one's attitude to the issue of Irish



national self-determination’ – but the republican movement itself could not adopt socialism as an immediate goal: ‘The republican struggle should not at this stage of its development style itself “socialist-republican”. This would imply that there is no place in it for non-socialists.’<sup>41</sup>

The demand for British withdrawal would itself prove dispensable as the Provos prepared to accept a peace deal based on internal reform and continued British rule. In a 1997 article, Eamonn McCann identified an elective affinity between the revamped Provisionals and Tony Blair’s New Labour that was every bit as strong as that between Sinn Féin and the Labour left a decade earlier:

Each of the parties now has a leadership with a pragmatic approach to ideas long regarded as fundamental to their political purpose. Labour’s commitment to state enterprise wasn’t just a matter of policy, it was written – Clause Four – into the party’s constitution. Britain’s claim to sovereignty over part of Ireland – long seen by republicans as an intolerable illegality which must be removed as a prerequisite for peace – was rendered in Gerry Adams’ Monaghan speech as ‘the key matter which must be addressed in any negotiation’. In the context of republican history and ideology, that represented at least as daring a policy revision as Blair’s ditching of Clause Four.<sup>42</sup>

The post-conflict dispensation in Northern Ireland was quietly underpinned by the neoliberal economic policies of the Blair government – with Sinn Féin’s tacit approval, as Kevin Bean and Mark Hayes have noted: ‘As members of the devolved executive, Sinn Féin representatives have embraced the dominant neo-liberal consensus by, among other things, cutting education and health-care funding, endorsing private finance initiatives, calling for cuts in corporation tax, and supporting a more competitive commercial environment. These policies reflect Sinn Féin’s clear assimilation of capitalist preconceptions that are, incidentally, perfectly compatible with inter-communal civil rights-based equality and ethnic pluralism.’<sup>43</sup> One leading Sinn Féin activist has spoken frankly about its shortcomings as a radical party: ‘The harsh reality of Sinn Féin’s socialism is that it has never been much more than the rhetorical expression of a demand for a more equal society ... the party’s socialism has been ambiguous, underdeveloped and at times contradictory.’<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Across the span of the conflict, the influence of Britain’s radical left along the two tracks identified at the beginning of this chapter was far from symmetrical. Desmond Greaves made the first sustained attempt to change the policy of the British labour movement, but his efforts and those of his co-thinkers could not secure any firm action from Harold Wilson’s government.



The idea for a civil rights campaign in Northern Ireland promoted by Greaves and his disciples in the Connolly Association proved to be far more influential. When the civil rights movement got off the ground in 1968, activists inspired by Trotskyism – who had cut their teeth on the British far-left scene – played a key role in organising the Derry and Burntollet marches that were of such seminal importance.

When the conflict between the Provos and the British Army took centre-stage from the early 1970s, the British far left continued to exert a certain influence on the Irish political scene – albeit usually at one remove. Members of the IMG provided advice and encouragement for the Provos as they executed a left turn under the leadership of Gerry Adams. Irish Trotskyists, with support from their international comrades, promoted the idea of a broad campaign in support of republican prisoners that was later taken up by the Provos, clearing the way for mass mobilisation at the time of the 1980–81 hunger strikes and enabling Sinn Féin to become a major political force. But despite their best efforts, leftists in Britain were unable to shift the Labour Party away from its support for the ‘bi-partisan’ consensus on Northern Ireland. The rise of the Labour left in the early 1980s threatened to disrupt that consensus; its rout at the hands of the party leadership guaranteed that there would be no shift in policy at Westminster or Whitehall while the IRA campaign lasted.

### Notes

- 1 T. A. Jackson, *Ireland Her Own* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991 first published 1947), p. 19. Another of Jackson’s hopeful predictions proved wide of the mark: ‘The spirit of Wolfe Tone and of the United Irishmen forms so fundamental an ingredient in Irish Nationalist tradition that one looks with confidence for an Irish enthusiasm for the Soviet Union parallel to that of Tone for the revolutionary people of France’ (p. 19).
- 2 D. Greaves, *Northern Ireland: Civil Rights and Political Wrongs* (London: CPGB, 1969), p. 10.
- 3 S. Prince, *Northern Ireland’s ‘68: Civil Rights, Global Revolt and the Origins of the Troubles* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), p. 95.
- 4 Ulster Unionist MPs took the Tory whip, and their party was formally linked to its British counterpart until the 1970s – a practice revived more recently by David Cameron.
- 5 P. Bew, P. Gibbon and H. Patterson, *Northern Ireland 1921–1996: Political Forces and Social Classes* (London: Serif 1996), p. 176.
- 6 The idea of a civil rights campaign had been floated in the 1940s by the first, short-lived Trotskyist group to be formed in Ireland, the Revolutionary Socialist Party: ‘At the last [Northern Ireland] Labour Party conference it was resolved that the Party should take the initiative in inaugurating a Northern Ireland Council for Civil Liberties. This is a welcome development ... the Trotskyist

movement has conducted a long campaign for the setting up of such a council ... by making a public display of samples of the British “democracy” being meted out to hundreds of Ulster citizens, a Civil Liberties Council has a revolutionary role to perform. It can hasten the downfall of the regime. It can set on fire the conscience of the whole community.’ Revolutionary Socialist Party, ‘Theses on Ireland’ (1944): [www.workersrepublic.org/Pages/Trotskyism/thesesonireland1.html](http://www.workersrepublic.org/Pages/Trotskyism/thesesonireland1.html) (accessed 26 February 2012).

- 7 Irish communism was divided between two organisations, the Irish Workers’ Party (IWP) in the South and the Communist Party of Northern Ireland (CPNI). At the beginning of the 1970s, the two parties merged to form a single Communist Party of Ireland (CPI).
- 8 Anthony Coughlan, interview with author, 2 November 2010. Coughlan himself did not join the IRA or Sinn Féin.
- 9 *United Irishman*, January 1967.
- 10 B. Purdie, *Politics in the Streets: The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1990), p. 229.
- 11 M. Farrell, ‘Long March to Freedom’, in M. Farrell (ed.), *Twenty Years On* (Dingle: Brandon, 1988), p. 56.
- 12 E. McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London: Pluto, 1993), pp. 83–91.
- 13 B. Devlin, *The Price of My Soul* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 118.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 113. Devlin herself would be elected to Westminster on a civil rights platform in the spring of 1969, becoming an international media sensation thanks to her youth and eloquence.
- 15 *Sunday Times* Insight Team, *Ulster* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 68.
- 16 G. Bell, *The Protestants of Ulster* (London: Pluto, 1976), pp. 141–2. Bell himself was a rare creature: a Belfast Protestant who became a Trotskyist and was sympathetic to the Provos.
- 17 K. J. Kelley, *The Longest War: Northern Ireland and the IRA* (London: Zed Books, 1988), pp. 128–9.
- 18 Many Official IRA volunteers in Belfast and Derry opposed the truce. The militarist faction broke away in 1975 to form the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) – better known for its military wing, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), which assassinated Margaret Thatcher’s close ally Airey Neave in 1979.
- 19 D. Bensaid, *Theses of Resistances and, ‘Who Are the Trotskyists?’* (London: Resistance Books, 2009), pp. 80–3.
- 20 B. Purdie, *Ireland Unfree* (London: IMG, 1972), pp. 37–8.
- 21 The IMG’s Robin Blackburn advanced this theory in an article for the *New Left Review*, pointing the finger at the Dublin authorities: Blackburn, ‘The Heath Government: A New Course for British Capitalism’, *New Left Review*, 1/70 (November–December 1971).
- 22 B. Hanley and S. Millar, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers’ Party* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 170.
- 23 E. Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 185–6.
- 24 Foley is remembered by Daniel Bensaid as a man who ‘read and spoke fifty languages, which he learned by the bunch; he had converted his room into a

- kind of igloo, exclusively wallpapered with dictionaries'. Bensaid, *An Impatient Life: A Memoir* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 258.
- 25 G. Foley, *Problems of the Irish Revolution: Can the IRA Meet the Challenge?* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), p. 6.
- 26 G. Foley, *The Test of Ireland* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), pp. 30–1.
- 27 Several PD members had been interned in August 1971, including its best-known spokesman Michael Farrell.
- 28 *Unfree Citizen*, March 1976.
- 29 Kelley, *Longest War*, pp. 286–7.
- 30 G. Adams, *The Politics of Irish Freedom* (Dingle: Brandon, 1986), pp. 75–6.
- 31 'H-Block' referred to the prison blocks in Long Kesh, which were laid out in the shape of Hs.
- 32 F. Stuart Ross, *Smashing H-Block: The Rise and Fall of the Popular Campaign Against Criminalization, 1976–1982* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), p. 164.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 34 M. Farrell, 'We Have Now Established a Sort of Republican Veto', *Magill*, July 1983.
- 35 K. Livingstone, 'Why Labour Lost', *New Left Review*, 1/140 (July–August 1983).
- 36 McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, p. 175.
- 37 G. Bell, *The British in Ireland: A Suitable Case for Withdrawal* (London, 1984), pp. 58–9.
- 38 E. Heffer and T. Benn, 'A Strategy for Labour: Four Documents', *New Left Review*, 1/158 (July–August 1986).
- 39 B. Rowthorn and N. Wayne, *Northern Ireland: The Political Economy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 169.
- 40 Adams, *Politics of Irish Freedom*, p. 154.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp. 129, 132, 135.
- 42 E. McCann, *War and Peace in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Hot Press, 1998), pp. 212–13.
- 43 K. Bean and M. Hayes, 'Sinn Féin and the New Republicanism in Ireland: Electoral Progress, Political Stasis, and Ideological Failure', *Radical History Review*, 104 (2009), pp. 126–42, p. 156.
- 44 E. Ó Broin, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism* (London: Pluto, 2009), p. 308.

## The point is to change it

### A short account of the Revolutionary Communist Party

*Michael Fitzpatrick*

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', 1852)<sup>1</sup>

The dialectical interaction of human subject and objective forces lies at the heart of the Marxist conception of historical development. As human consciousness grows through active intervention in the world it becomes a factor in the transformation of social reality. From its emergence in the 1970s to its demise in the 1990s, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) emphasised the active, subjective aspect of this relationship. This preoccupation with the subjective factor may be regarded as an adjustment to the experience of its marginality. It may also be seen as a constructive response to a period when external factors were persistently inauspicious and the balance of forces highly unfavourable.<sup>2</sup>

#### Contexts

How did the objective situation stand in the 1970s in Britain? The young men and women who went on to form the RCP certainly thought that the capitalist social system was, for all its progressive dynamism, an unconscionable barrier to the achievement of a better world. They believed that overcoming this barrier was both necessary and possible. Despite the enormous strides that the system had taken for humanity, not even in its most prosperous heartlands could capitalism eliminate hardship, poverty and oppression. Recognition that great progress had been made was appropriate, resignation that 'this is it', that we could do little better, was unacceptable. A few years

into the decade another serious economic crisis loomed, providing evidence once more of the inbuilt tendencies of the social order towards breakdown and war.

Yet if the system appeared rotten and vulnerable, the opposition to it looked weak. Some left-wing academic commentators talked up the prospects of a challenge, but others talked them down. In 1971 the *New Left Review* reprinted and reviewed documents on the practicalities of organising an insurrection.<sup>3</sup> In the same year, however, the radical sociologist Barry Hindess published a well-received book entitled *The Decline of Working Class Politics*.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding the growing inclination of radical intellectuals to dismiss the capacity of the working class to drive change, events tended to confirm the centrality of class conflict in modern capitalist society. In Britain in 1972 trade union forces humiliated the National Industrial Relations Court. In 1974 they forced a Conservative government from office. Interviewed in 1975, militant miners' leader Arthur Scargill reflected on the prospects for revolution:

The capitalist system is in big trouble but everything will depend upon the particular circumstances. It may well be that a crisis situation, similar to the one that we had in 1972 and 1974, may produce those circumstances and that a socialist revolution may be that much nearer in a number of Western countries than many people think.<sup>5</sup>

Further threats to stability across the West came from national liberation movements and from domestic terrorist groups. Revolutionary events in Portugal in 1975, the result of a combination of anti-colonial and domestic revolt in one of Europe's weakest nation states, raised radical hopes throughout Europe. Right-wingers as well as leftists anticipated drastic social upheaval. Returning home from studying counter-insurgency in Britain's former colonies, Richard Clutterbuck encountered a 'groundswell of fear ... that the complex structure of our industrial society ... would break apart in chaos'.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, it was also evident that the working class was changing rapidly. It was no longer the relatively cohesive mass of old, and, more significantly, it appeared bereft of the political leadership that it desperately needed. In the same year that Clutterbuck trembled, historian Eric Hobsbawm delivered his influential lecture, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?'. He concluded that 'very serious questions' hung over the future of the labour movement, and that, well, somebody should do something about it.<sup>7</sup>

The individuals who came together to form what became the RCP made a balanced assessment. They knew that they faced an enormous challenge, but they rejected Hobsbawm's fatalism, and identified his political tradition

as part of the problem. In adopting the perspective of building a revolutionary organisation, they did so with a more sober assessment of the immediate prospects than those who saw imminent revolution. An orientation to the working class followed from the development of the Marxist theory of crisis. But while they appreciated the potential and organisational strength of the class, they also identified disabling ideological weaknesses. They highlighted, in particular, the powerful negative influences exerted by the left in the institutions of the labour movement.

Like most organisations of the far left in Britain in the years after 1968, the RCP was small in size and marginal in influence. Starting out with only a few dozen supporters in the late 1970s, membership peaked at around 200 in the early 1990s, though by then it could routinely attract more than 1,000 people to its summer schools. Furthermore, though it emerged out of the left, in many ways it was not of the left and it developed in a struggle against it. In contrast with the spirit of amenable coexistence that prevailed among other factions, the RCP maintained a high level of polemical engagement with the left.<sup>8</sup> Though other far-left groups discreetly accepted the RCP's characterisation of the official labour movement as 'reformist', the RCP was openly critical of them. It consistently pointed out that in practice these groups constantly adapted to the reformism of the official movement, reinforcing rather than loosening its grip on militants and activists.

The history of the RCP is that of a self-conscious attempt to transcend the tradition of the dead generations. It set out to overcome the legacy of past defeats that culminated in fascism and war and weighed 'like a nightmare' on the brains of all those living through the post-war decades. A distinctive feature of the party as it developed was that it compensated for its lack of numbers by maintaining a high profile through campaigning and propaganda. Indeed, as a result, it often made a bigger impact than groups that were larger and had been around for longer. To the RCP these groups lacked clarity and conviction, and their members appeared to have become accustomed to low levels of commitment and activity.

The dominant imperative for the RCP was the need to promote an independent anti-capitalist outlook. It was intended thereby to give voice and effect to the interests of the working class and humanity as a whole. The party was the organisational expression of this understanding, its mode of intervention in the social reality it aspired to transform. It sought to develop and sustain a creative balance between activities around issues of exploitation, on the one hand, and issues of oppression, on the other. It engaged in workplace and trade union struggles and campaigns for women's rights, and against racism and imperialism.

The story of the RCP is a drama in three acts, broadly corresponding to the three decades following the radical upsurge of the late 1960s: its emergence

in the 1970s, the phase of 'party-building' in the 1980s, and the events leading up to its dissolution in the mid-1990s. We trace here the evolution of the RCP through these three phases.

### Emergence in the 1970s

Many of the individuals who went on to form the RCP were members of the International Socialists in the early 1970s. This was the most successful combination of old Trotskyists, radical students and militant trade unionists to emerge from the wave of strikes, protests and demonstrations that swept Britain and other Western countries in the previous decade. Though energetic, the IS shared the ideological weakness of the wider left and constantly adapted in an opportunist manner to prevailing forms of militancy.<sup>9</sup>

By the mid-1970s, the tide had already turned in favour of the established order. The radical upsurge had been largely contained, compounding the effects of the preceding half century of defeats. The onset of recession and the return of a Labour government in 1974 led to the negotiation of the 'Social Contract' with the trade union leaders. This agreement drew the unions into sharing responsibility for resolving the economic crisis. The unions' endorsement of restraints on wages and public spending rapidly dampened industrial militancy. The labour movement's acceptance of the Social Contract disoriented the left, which fragmented as a result.<sup>10</sup>

In 1973 a loose grouping of oppositionists was expelled from the International Socialists. Some of them, around the economist David Yaffe, founded the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG), which was launched in March 1974. Several members of this group, including Frank Furedi (who used the pseudonym Frank Richards), later played prominent roles in the RCP.

*Our Tasks and Methods*, the founding document of the modern revolutionary communist tradition, was published in January 1975.<sup>11</sup> It marks a definitive break between the movement's conception of an explicitly revolutionary perspective and the prevailing understanding of the 'radical left'. The new group believed that the left lacked the ideological and organisational rigour required to advance its subjectively revolutionary aspirations. *Our Tasks and Methods* argued that, as a result of 'the worsening crisis', workers attempting to defend living standards and working conditions were being confronted with the inadequacy of their existing organisations. As a result they were being 'driven by the pressure of objective events to look for alternative political solutions to the problems they face'.<sup>12</sup> The 'three-fold tasks' identified in this document were to win this 'potential vanguard', through developing an anti-capitalist programme and establishing a professional revolutionary organisation.

In November 1976, a minority of the RCG was expelled in a dispute over tactics in relation to the Stalinist Communist Party of Great Britain, then still a dominant force on the British left.<sup>13</sup> This minority, led by Frank Furedi, opposed what they regarded as an opportunist attempt to intervene in internal disputes in the Communist Party-led Anti-Apartheid Movement. Still committed to the principles of *Our Tasks and Methods*, this group named itself the Revolutionary Communist Tendency (RCT). After a period of internal consolidation, the RCT emerged into public activity in 1977, defining itself as a propaganda group.<sup>14</sup> Based in London, with handfuls of supporters in provincial cities, the RCT launched *the next step* as a six weekly review in December 1979, and this soon became a substantial monthly publication. The RCT, like the RCP later, was organised along democratic centralist lines, directed by an annually elected political committee.

### Early positions

#### *Who needs the Labour Party?*

As the 1979 general election and Margaret Thatcher's historic victory approached, the RCT confirmed its independent trajectory by advocating an abstentionist position in relation to the Labour Party.<sup>15</sup> The various groupings of the left were highly critical of the record of the Labour governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan. They particularly protested against the imposition of wage restraints and public spending cuts. These measures precipitated the strikes of the 1978–79 'Winter of Discontent'. Yet the left followed its customary procedure of suspending hostilities towards the Labour Party for the duration of the election. As left-wingers were campaigning actively for Labour, they fiercely resented the RCT for stepping up its attack on the party it identified as the major obstacle to the advance of working-class interests.

In the pamphlet *Who Needs the Labour Party?*, Mike Freeman and Kate Marshall presented a critique of the state socialist traditions of British Labourism and argued that critical support for the Labour Party in the 1979 election was simply not an option. There had to be a realistic focus on winning, not 'the masses', but a 'working class vanguard'.<sup>16</sup> The RCT's priority was not to secure a Labour government, but to establish a political alternative to Labourism. The point of the abstentionist strategy was 'to counterpose an independent political and organisational alternative to Labour'. The RCT dismissed the left's support for Labour as 'the lesser evil' because it was an adaptation to the prevailing outlook of the labour movement and could only compound its ideological disarray.<sup>17</sup>

*Who Needs the Labour Party?* concluded with a declaration that, as well as refusing to support Labour, the RCT intended to make 'the questions of



Ireland and racism living issues during the election campaign'.<sup>18</sup> The widespread acceptance in the labour movement of the primacy of British national interests in relation to the war in Ireland and immigration helped to consolidate the ideological hegemony of the ruling class. For the RCT, challenging these prejudices was crucial to developing an independent working-class outlook, in solidarity with Irish republicans and overseas immigrants.

*Against 'narrow anti-fascism' and against all immigration controls*

The apparent growth in popularity of an avowedly fascist grouping – the National Front (NF) – became a major focus for the left in the 1970s. In the October 1974 general election, the NF won more than 100,000 votes, and a similar total in local London elections in 1977. In response the Socialist Workers Party launched the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), which adopted a twin track strategy. It cultivated mainstream political and celebrity sponsorship through depicting the National Front as a revival of pre-war German fascism and appealing to the spirit of the wartime patriotic anti-fascism. At the same time, activists pursued a policy of allowing 'no platform' to NF speakers. In *Under a National Flag: Fascism, Racism and the Labour Movement*, published in January 1978, Frank Richards characterised the ANL approach as 'narrow anti-fascism'. He argued that it separated the fight against the NF from the wider struggle against racism and nationalism, outlooks that were deeply entrenched in the labour movement.<sup>19</sup>

Richards presented an analysis of the historic character of fascism and the specific features of the rise of the NF. He noted both its relative weakness and its potential to grow as a result of the fear and insecurity generated by the economic crisis. He drew attention to the common nationalist themes in the responses of the NF and the official labour movement to industrial decline and mass unemployment. Noting that both the fascists and the unions supported controls on imports and immigration, Richards observed that 'the real danger that the NF reveals is the nationalism of the working class'.<sup>20</sup> He argued that in focusing on the extreme nationalism of the NF, the ANL ignored the mainstream nationalism of the labour movement. Concentrating its protests on NF demonstrations, the left evaded issues such as deportations, racial discrimination in the workplace and racist attacks.

Though it reflected a militant hostility to the fascists, the 'no platform' position was an evasion of the tasks of ideological and political engagement with nationalism and racism:

But fascism cannot be defeated at this stage by pre-emptive physical action: it is a product of a particular political and economic climate and can only be defeated by the political struggle of the working class.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, argued Richards, 'by diverting attention away from the everyday, drab chauvinism of the labour movement, the "no platform" position actually hinders this struggle'.<sup>22</sup> He pointed out that 'people support the NF not because it is fascist but because it appears to have answers to their real problems'.<sup>23</sup> His conclusion was that the fight against the NF 'must be conducted by combatting the specific arguments put forward by fascists'.<sup>24</sup>

As the ANL shifted its activities from periodic confrontations with fascist marches to musical events, the RCT took the initiative in anti-racist activities. Through local Workers Against Racism groups in East London and elsewhere, it promoted 'workers' defence' against racist attacks as well as campaigning against all immigration controls as domestically divisive and oppressive, and internationally repugnant to the principle of free movement.<sup>25</sup> The RCT did not support radical calls for official bans on fascist meetings or demonstrations. Nevertheless, while upholding the principle of free speech, the RCT recognised that the use or threat of violence had obviously to be met with force. Workers Against Racism organised patrols to prevent racist attacks on council estates in Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Newham, and in other cities. Activists provided support to black victims of police harassment and families threatened with deportation. They also mobilised solidarity for immigrant workers taking strike action, who often lacked official trade union backing. Workers Against Racism took the argument against all immigration controls into the trade union movement, organising local discussions and conferences, emphasising the principle of working-class unity against state fostered divisions and prejudices.

#### *Ireland: 'Troops Out Now!'*

By 1979 war had been raging in Northern Ireland for a decade and more than 2,000 people had been killed. In the face of a massive military force in Ireland, the republican movement continued its armed resistance, including periodic bombing campaigns in Britain, some causing substantial civilian casualties. The British occupation of Northern Ireland enjoyed widespread popular support, stretching across the labour movement. This support extended to measures of repression directed against the Irish community in Britain, codified in the Prevention of Terrorism Act. In this climate, the RCT refused to join the widespread condemnation of the Irish republican movement and upheld its right to decide its own tactics in the struggle for national self-determination. The RCT insisted on the need to take an independent stand against the prevailing consensus. It emphasised the crucial significance of the Irish liberation struggle as a threat to the integrity of the United Kingdom and the British state, the body responsible for the enforcement of the interests of capital in general.

In *Workers Against Imperialism: The British Labour Movement and Ireland*, a pamphlet published in May 1979, Mary Masters emphasised the link between the national struggle in Ireland and the class struggle in Britain:

British workers cannot ignore the cause of Irish liberation without renouncing their class interests. A British labour movement which is not anti-imperialist cannot defend itself against the attacks of the capitalist class. In declaring support for the Irish struggle, British workers will serve notice that class politics must prevail over the bourgeois consensus. This will be a decisive step on the road to the liberation of the British working class.<sup>26</sup>

Masters was critical of a series of initiatives from the official labour movement that appealed to the British government to introduce progressive social and economic policies in Northern Ireland. She argued that this call for a 'positive colonial policy' implicitly 'rejects the solution sought by the Irish people – national independence'.<sup>27</sup> The left's approach, she insisted, in effect endorsed the partition of the country and served to legitimise the continuing military occupation. By contrast, the RCT campaigned for 'unconditional support' for the national liberation struggle and called for the immediate withdrawal of British troops. It also campaigned against the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the criminalisation of republican prisoners. The launch of the Irish Freedom Movement in 1982 led to a major expansion of Irish solidarity activities. Over the next decade its handbook went through three editions.<sup>28</sup>

### 'Party-building' in the 1980s

The Revolutionary Communist Party was formally launched in London in May 1981.<sup>29</sup> Two articles – 'Marxism in Our Time' and 'The Road to Power' – published in the first issue of the RCP's theoretical journal *Confrontation* in 1986 provide a comprehensive account of the RCP's programmatic development and its political strategy in the 1980s.<sup>30</sup> In a critique of the left's divorce of theory from practice, Frank Richards insisted that 'a Marxist theoretician has no choice but to be a Marxist politician, to ensure that the struggle for theory yields organisational consequences'. Invoking the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács, he argued that 'to rise about the level of an abstract opinion, theory "if it really intends to point the way to its own fulfilment in practice", must develop an "organisational arm"'.<sup>31</sup> This quotation from Lukács became the RCP's first principle of organisation.

In 'The Road to Power', Mike Freeman drew out the political and organisational consequences of this approach, through expounding the RCP's conception of the 'vanguard party'. Recognising the depoliticisation and

fragmentation of the working class, he outlined a strategy that aimed to foster working-class unity through campaign work and through the development of theory and propaganda. He also indicated the sort of 'interventionist' activity the party now sought to adopt.

If the RCP's political positions were inimical to the left, its organisational style was scarcely less so. The intense animosity directed against the RCP on this account was consistent with an 'anti-party' sentiment that was pervasive among left-wingers, even among those formally affiliated to organisations that called themselves parties. The roots of this outlook may be traced through a series of radical initiatives, from the May Day Manifesto of 1967, through the 'Beyond the Fragments' conferences of 1978–79 to the Socialist Society events of the late 1980s. The significant movements of the left – the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the Anti-Nazi League – all adopted similar organisational principles. These initiatives achieved periodic mass mobilisations and appeared to make a major impact. The left's adaptation to the prevailing outlook of the participants, however, meant that the opportunity to promote a greater political awareness was lost. As a result the crowds came and went, largely unpoliticised, even depoliticised, by their contact with the left. While the big demonstrations provided a pool of potential recruits for left-wing groups, the principles of 'membership without commitment, activity without direction' evidently had a corrosive effect.<sup>32</sup>

The combination of defeats at home and the collapse of the Soviet empire in the late 1980s effectively finished off the official labour movement and the left. Of course, the same conditions faced the RCP too. Its efforts to build a revolutionary party certainly coincided with a mounting tide of reaction. The launch of *the next step* as a weekly paper took place at the end of the miners' strike in 1985. The first issue of the monthly *Living Marxism* was published in November 1988 when the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe entered a process of disintegration. Nevertheless, in the course of the 1980s, the RCP built up a national organisation, with branches in most provincial cities, as well as in Scotland and Wales. *Preparing for Power*, the party's annual summer school in London, attracted a growing audience. The circle of party supporters also expanded, as did the scale of party mobilisations for events such as conferences or demonstrations.

### Key positions and controversies

#### *Taking sides against imperialism*

The Falklands War in the spring of 1982 marked a turning point in the fortunes of Margaret Thatcher's government. After three years in power and presiding over recession, deindustrialisation and mass unemployment,

the government was riven by internal divisions and deeply unpopular in the country. The success of the British naval task force in reoccupying the Falklands following the seizure of the South Atlantic islands by Argentina turned the tide of public opinion. Margaret Thatcher's astute deployment of the patriotic 'Falklands factor' played a key role in her decisive general election victory the following year. By contrast with Thatcher's resolute posture as 'the Iron Lady', the left's response to the war was one of confusion and equivocation.

So far as the RCP was concerned, the left was criticising the government's military strategy, and at the same time endorsing the consensus of condemnation of the Argentine regime. Indeed the left often seemed to go even further than the mainstream press in depicting General Galtieri as a fascist dictator. The RCP criticised the left's denial of the legitimacy of Argentina's claim to the Falklands Islands and its support for the resolution of the dispute through United Nations intervention or economic sanctions.

In *Malvinas Are Argentina's*, published in June 1982, Mike Freeman documented the historic domination of Argentina by the imperialist powers, notably by Britain. He also appraised what he considered to be the shameful record of the British left in disingenuously labelling earlier Argentine leaders who had challenged imperialism as 'fascists'.<sup>33</sup> He dismissed claims for 'national self-determination' for the Falkland Islanders as 'an absurdity':

Britain invokes the rights of 1800 Falklanders to 'self-determination' to refute the claims of 27 million Argentines to territories which historically, geographically and politically they have every right to claim as their own.<sup>34</sup>

The RCP took sides with Argentina in its conflict with Britain: hence the use of the term 'Malvinas' for the disputed islands. The call for the defeat of British imperialism in the South Atlantic was deeply unpopular on the left, leading to attempts to exclude RCP contingents from anti-war protests.

The RCP continued to campaign against Western, especially British, military intervention overseas into the 1990s. In *The Empire Strikes Back: Why We Need a New Anti-War Movement*, published in April 1993, Mike Freeman identified the Gulf War of September 1990 as 'a turning point' in the readiness of Western powers to resort to overtly imperialist policies.<sup>35</sup> The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War had given the USA a free hand to impose its authority on the New World Order. At the same time, economic stagnation in the West and an associated sense of moral decline drove all the Western powers to seek a new purpose in foreign policy.

At a conference in London in November 1992, the RCP launched a 'manifesto against militarism'. This initiative sought to build a new anti-war movement to challenge 'the moral rearmament of imperialism' and to combat the drive towards war. The manifesto challenged the revival of nationalist

sentiments in Western countries and the presumption of moral superiority over peoples in other countries. It called for resistance to racist policies against immigrants and refugees. These themes were pursued in numerous articles in *Living Marxism* and in campaigning responses to particular conflicts.

It was clear to the RCP that the consensus behind the revival of imperialism had been boosted by the collapse of the peace and anti-war movements. Over the next decade, the consequences of this became increasingly apparent as erstwhile leftists and peace activists became some of the loudest voices in the chorus demanding military intervention, justified in humanitarian terms. In a quest to find abroad a sense of moral purpose lacking at home, Western commentators took sides in complex conflicts in Africa and the Middle East – and soon, in the former Yugoslavia. Identifying one side as innocent victims of crimes against humanity and the other as psychopathic killers, earnest activists and practitioners of the ‘journalism of attachment’ began to demand Western military intervention. As a result, the scourge of warfare and social disruption has ripped through Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Zaire, Bosnia, Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, followed by a growing mass of refugees.

#### *The miners’ strike and the call for a ballot*

The miners’ strike began in March 1984 as a fight to save jobs in collieries threatened with closure. After fierce confrontations between pickets and police and growing divisions between striking and working miners, the strike ended twelve months later in a historic defeat for the British labour movement. In pamphlets, by Frank Richards (July 1984) and by Mike Freeman (March 1985), the RCP challenged the union leadership’s attempt to justify the strike in terms of the best interests of the British coalmining industry. It also criticised its bureaucratic conduct of the strike, symbolised by the refusal to hold a ballot of members.<sup>36</sup>

The key problem that emerged in the first two weeks of the dispute was the division between miners in the relatively secure Nottinghamshire coalfield and those in other areas whose jobs were under immediate threat. Miners’ leader Arthur Scargill sought to manipulate the union rule book to call a national strike without conducting a ballot of members. In response, the RCP argued that holding a ballot was the only way to unite the miners. In the early weeks of the strike *the next step* campaigned for a ballot. It argued that whereas the Nottinghamshire miners would never be persuaded that a strike was good for the Nottinghamshire coalfield, they could be won over by an appeal to their common class interests with miners in other areas. The ballot controversy was thus, in essence, a dispute over the strategy of the strike. It was an argument about the best means of achieving unity among the miners, and unity with workers in other industries. It was also

an argument for putting the rank and file rather than the bureaucracy in control of the strike.

The RCP criticised the left for putting its loyalty to the labour bureaucracy before its commitment to working-class independence. It endorsed Scargill's evasion of democratic accountability, and ignored his declarations of commitment to profitable British coal production. The RCP further condemned the left for applauding the radical postures that in reality disguised Scargill's abdication of leadership in the strike. Rather than criticising the union leadership, the left reserved its most hostile invective for the RCP and its call for a ballot. The tragedy of the miners' long and bitter struggle was that, as Freeman observed at the end of the strike, 'the refusal to hold a ballot meant an admission of defeat at the very outset'.<sup>37</sup>

In September 1984, in the middle of the strike, the RCP published *Taking Control*, a handbook for militants working in trade unions. This emphasised the vital steps at grass roots level that could build a politically and organisationally independent labour movement, a movement that could win.<sup>38</sup>

#### *Against 'the Aids panic'*

Perhaps the most dramatic confirmation of the demise of the labour movement as a political force came in its incapacity to resist the wave of moral panics that came to play a major political role from the late 1980s onwards. These arose around a wide range of issues, from abortion and child abuse to terrorism and crime. From the outset, the RCP had placed a particular emphasis on making the fight for women's rights a central feature of the struggle against capitalism.<sup>39</sup> In 1985, in *Moral Panics and Victorian Values: Women and the Family in Thatcher's Britain*, Kate Marshall identified 'the common themes running through all the moral panics' as 'the elevation of the family, parental responsibility and respect for law and order and the authority of the state'.<sup>40</sup> In addition to the quest to restore traditional – 'Victorian' – family values, Marshall noted the promotion of a 'new morality', fostering 'a climate in which conformity is acceptable and experimentation a crime'.<sup>41</sup>

The RCP's critical response to state moralising was further developed in 1988 by Joan Phillips in *Policing the Family: Social Control in Thatcher's Britain*.<sup>42</sup> In this book, Phillips examined how the government had 'created a new climate of conformity and widened the scope of state interference in sexual and moral matters'.<sup>43</sup>

The 'new morality' received its greatest boost from the Aids panic which raged in Britain from 1986 onwards. Fortified by its work in taking up the ideological challenges posed by issues of oppression, the RCP was well prepared to confront the new offensive. On the other hand, the established movements of the left, including those of feminists and gay activists, were unable to recognise the Aids panic for what it was, a mobilisation of fear



by institutions of the state around a moral agenda. The publication of *The Truth About the Aids Panic* in March 1987 stung the left precisely because it had swallowed the official propaganda whole.<sup>44</sup>

*The Truth About the Aids Panic* was written by Michael Fitzpatrick (informed by his work as a GP) and Don Milligan (drawing on his experience as a veteran activist in the gay liberation movement). It was a direct response to the government's 'Don't Die of Ignorance' public awareness campaign about Aids. Reviewing the scientific and epidemiological evidence, Fitzpatrick and Milligan argued that there was no good evidence that HIV infection was likely to spread rapidly among heterosexuals in Britain. They also pointed out that the significant risk to gay men was being compounded by continuing prejudice and discrimination, which had intensified as a consequence of the Aids scare.

Taking a wider sociological perspective, *The Truth About the Aids Panic* characterised official scaremongering about Aids as a 'moral panic'. A relatively rare disease had provided a focus for 'stirring up public anxieties, fears and animosities' in the context of 'deepening social crisis'. In parallel with the attempt to take advantage of the Aids scare to revive traditional family values, they noted a novel and more significant trend – the promotion of a new moral code of 'safe sex'. In this project, leading figures in the gay movement and the left emerged as prominent public health campaigners.<sup>45</sup> Fitzpatrick and Milligan argued that 'the only way to save lives from Aids is by rejecting the panic that surrounds it and by fighting for the rights of lesbians and gay men'.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile the mainstream left limited its criticism of government policy to complaints that it had done 'too little, too late', thus effectively endorsing the moralising agenda. Such was the animosity aroused by *The Truth About the Aids Panic* that some left-wing bookshops refused to stock the pamphlet and others assaulted RCP members selling it at public events.<sup>47</sup>

From the RCP's perspective, the critique developed in relation to the defence of the interests of women and of gay men was also significant in bringing into focus important changing conditions in society as a whole. A climate of conformism was increasingly being promoted by the state, less through traditional channels such as political parties and trade unions, and more through an unmediated approach to more atomised individuals.

### The end of an era

Frank Furedi's critique of the Soviet Union, *The Soviet Union Demystified*, published in 1986, proved remarkably prescient.<sup>48</sup> It presented a logical reconstruction of Soviet development since the Russian Revolution of 1917 and concluded that 'the stagnation of Soviet society reveals its failure to



evolve a developmental dynamic'.<sup>49</sup> In defiance of the deep-rooted traditions of the left, Furedi argued that the Soviet Union had 'no progressive tendencies'. In his view, 'its very survival owes more to the rivalries among the imperialist powers than to its own form of social organisation'. He warned that 'the destiny of the Soviet Union will be largely decided by events in the international arena'.<sup>50</sup>

In the late 1980s, Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed one after another and, in 1991, Stalinist rule came to an end in the Soviet Union itself. These events, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall in December 1989, marked the end of the Cold War. They also ended the wider polarisations between communism and capitalism, left and right, which had dominated the world for 150 years. Though the RCP had always been staunchly anti-Stalinist, as a 'communist' party, it could hardly escape the global backlash from the collapse of the Soviet empire.

The persistence of class conflict at unprecedented levels through the 1970s and 1980s had vindicated earlier RCP perspectives. For all the party's attempts to reset the left's agenda, it had not, however, succeeded in drawing out a significant section of workers committed to a broad anti-capitalist programme. Rather than provoking a significant anti-capitalist response, the combative policies of the employers and the government had intensified a sense of powerlessness. Instead of the anticipated divergence between a militant minority and a moderate majority, a more basic division had emerged. On the one hand, many appeared indifferent to the fate of labour movement organisations. On the other, a residual section remained loyal to traditions that appeared increasingly backward-looking and ineffectual.

The experience of a series of setbacks had induced widespread demoralisation and passivity. Many accepted redundancies and less favourable terms and conditions in the workplace. The parallel trend in the political sphere was towards the rejection of the Labour Party in favour of supporting the Conservatives or one of the centre parties, which gained substantially in this period.<sup>51</sup> In response to these pressures, the more militant workers assumed a defensive posture in relation to the established labour movement. The failure of more radical alternatives, such as those represented by the miners' leader Arthur Scargill or by Tony Benn, the leading figure of the parliamentary left, contributed to the prevailing despondency.

By the end of the 1980s it was clear that developments in Britain and abroad had intensified the depoliticisation of the working class. As Frank Furedi put it, provisionally but bluntly, in 'Midnight in the Century', a feature article in *Living Marxism*, 'for the time being at least, the working class has no political existence'. He admitted that the prospects for the advance of Marxism after the end of the Cold War appeared grim.<sup>52</sup> The parallel collapse of the left and the exhaustion of the right had resulted in

a general disillusionment with ‘grand narratives’ and a fatalistic resignation to market forces. The demise of traditional forms of collectivity compounded with wider atomising forces had produced an unprecedented degree of individuation in society. Familiar forms of class conflict appeared to be coming to an end.

The RCP now explicitly recognised that the working class had disappeared as a political force, bringing to an end the era that had opened with the revolutions of 1848. As it became increasingly difficult to project any sort of party strategy in the 1990s, the emphasis shifted towards advancing an intellectual rather than a practical alternative. Though campaigning activities continued, most resources went into promoting the journal *Living Marxism* as a forum for political debate. Relabelled as *LM*, it continued as a vibrant magazine until 2000 when it was forced to close after being sued for libel by ITN, a news organisation.<sup>53</sup>

### ‘The point is to change it’

*The Point Is to Change It* was published in 1996 in anticipation of the May 1997 general election that brought Tony Blair’s New Labour to power. In his preface, *Living Marxism* editor Mick Hume drew attention to the absence of ‘a clear divide between left and right, or between parties representing different social classes’:

There is no great clash of competing visions of the future for humanity. Instead, all shades of opinion within mainstream politics now appear to agree that there is no alternative. That general lack of belief in the possibility of changing things for the better has itself become the central issue of our times.<sup>54</sup>

In the 1980s, the RCP had run candidates in elections as a focus for campaigning and party-building activities. Now, in the months leading up to the general election, party activists concentrated on promoting a wider ideological challenge to the prevailing political consensus. *The Point Is to Change It* brought together the themes developed in *Living Marxism* over the preceding five years. Hume noted the replacement of ‘the great ideological “isms”’ of the past with ‘“isms” of a very different sort – cynicism, pessimism, fatalism – in an age when few can see anything much worth believing in’.<sup>55</sup> The promotion of an apparently endless series of scares and panics inflated the problems facing society. It intensified a sense of powerlessness, appearing to confirm the futility of any attempt to change the world as it was.

For Hume, ‘a sense of low expectations converges with a heightened sense of risk to diminish our common humanity’.<sup>56</sup> The convergence of the mainstream political parties around Margaret Thatcher’s bleak nostrum ‘There Is No Alternative’ (to the capitalist system) reflected a wider problem.

Hume identified this as ‘the diminished role of subjectivity’ in a ‘culture of limits’ that ascribed ‘a minimal role to the subject, the active agency of human intervention’.<sup>57</sup>

The degradation of subjectivity in a society that has traditionally placed the highest value on the rugged individualism of the entrepreneur is a sure sign of a deep-seated malaise in capitalist society. The roots of this malaise are to be found in a combination of economic stagnation and political exhaustion, leading to social paralysis.<sup>58</sup>

In subsequent chapters, Hume surveyed different manifestations of the contemporary paralysis in the spheres of politics and economics. He concluded with an appraisal of the pervasive moralism of risk-avoidance and the far-reaching consequences of the ‘precautionary principle’ in science and cultural life.

### **The end of the party**

By 1996, it was clear that the party form had become redundant, and steps were duly taken to wind up the RCP. The project outlined twenty years earlier in *Our Tasks and Methods* had evidently failed to achieve its objectives. Indeed, by the early 1980s, and the advent of the Thatcher/Reagan era, the window of opportunity opened up by militant responses to the recession was already closing fast. As long as class conflict was contained within the framework of trade unionism, and wider political struggles remained isolated from the labour movement, the threat to the system could be contained.

The RCP failed to build a party capable of pushing aside the old left and revitalising in the working class the task of political and social revolution. Did it underestimate the resilience of the capitalist system, in political as well as economic terms? Did it overestimate its capacity to intervene and influence developments? In retrospect, the answer to both questions is clearly – yes. It would, however, be a mistake to read history backwards, or to forget that any assessment of past political judgements is particularly vulnerable to the doubtful wisdom of hindsight. In any event, it is hard to see what other course could have been followed by a group committed to revolutionary social change emerging from the largely hapless left of the 1970s. The objective situation needed addressing, and the point was to change it, and there was no remotely credible alternative to the path taken by the RCP.

One important consequence of the RCP’s rigorous pursuit of ideological and political independence was that it was able to withstand the demoralising pressures of this period. The old left itself, in all its diverse forms, dwindled and fragmented, and had effectively disintegrated by the early 1990s. In contrast, the RCP wound up its organisation as part of a disciplined

re-orientation to changed circumstances. *The Point Is to Change It* acknowledged the new challenges. It insisted on the need to 'to fight against all of the new rules and codes which are designed to regulate and constrain individual action'.<sup>59</sup> It concluded with a two-page 'manifesto for a world fit for people':

Our reply to all of the pleas for caution and restraint is that until now humanity has only learned to crawl. We still live in a world that is not fit for people. Our problem is not that we are too ambitious, but that we continually hesitate about experimenting with new solutions. We need a revolution in outlook, so that we can continue to advance and give new scope to human creativity.<sup>60</sup>

Former members accepted that they had not succeeded in building a revolutionary party. It is notable, however, that over the following decades, they did not become demoralised or disoriented, but in general remained committed to social change, and to taking responsibility for that as individuals, rather than collectively.

The RCP was a small organisation – of course, it was never easy to join. But for a marginal group it carried a big punch. It showed what could be, and can be, achieved by a group with a common commitment and a clear vision. It had an impressive record of campaigning, combining trade union work with a range of anti-racist and anti-imperialist activities. It also left a substantial and enduring intellectual legacy.

From the outset, the RCP recognised the importance of developing a comprehensive challenge to the ideological dominance of the British establishment. Assumptions of national, imperial and racial superiority, together with patriarchal family values, have long played a central role in securing the moral authority of the ruling elite. The RCP sought to promote the potential of the working class as the agency capable of playing a universal role in tackling the oppressions of capitalist society. One consequence of the failure of this project is that, in more recent years, issues of oppression have become progressively embroiled in multiculturalism and identity politics. This has had the effect of reproducing rather than overcoming divisions and conflicts.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the RCP is the example it offers of the collective experience of operating, not merely in an adversarial, but in a consciously interventionist relationship to contemporary trends. The organised pursuit of an independent approach allowed a group of individuals to express and advance the cause of human emancipation in many different circumstances. Indeed, it has enabled both veterans of this tradition and new adherents to uphold that cause today in speaking and writing, in conferences and on-line forums, and in their own fields of endeavour. Such voices are of inestimable value in a period when the defence of subjectivity itself has become the precondition for further progress.

## Notes

- 1 K. Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' [1852], *Selected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1973), p. 96.
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- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 34–5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 19 F. Richards, *Under a National Flag: Fascism, Racism and the Labour Movement*, Revolutionary Communist Pamphlets, No. 2 (1978).
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 24 *Ibid.*

- 25 K. Tompson, *Under Siege: Racial Violence in Britain Today* (London: Penguin Special, 1978).
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- 28 Irish Freedom Movement, *The Irish War: The Irish Freedom Movement Handbook* (London: Junius, 1983, 1985 and 1987).
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- 30 F. Richards, 'Marxism in Our Time', *Confrontation*, 1 (1986); M. Freeman, 'The Road to Power', *Confrontation*, 1 (1986).
- 31 Richards, 'Marxism in Our Time', p. 21.
- 32 M. Masters, Review of Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism, the Next Step* (June/July, 1980).
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- 35 Freeman, M. (1993) *The Empire Strikes Back: Why We Need an Anti-Imperialist Movement*, Revolutionary Communist Party (April).
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- 57 Ibid., p. 67.
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- 59 Ibid., p. 217.
- 60 Ibid.

## The Militant Tendency and entrisism in the Labour Party

*Christopher Massey*

This chapter examines the Militant Tendency and its tactic of entrisism within the British Labour Party. Through an investigation of Labour's responses to such tactics, this chapter highlights the successes, and failures, of Militant within the Labour Party, particularly focusing on the group's infiltration of the party's youth wing and on constituency politics in Liverpool. Despite inauspicious beginnings, Militant was the most successful entrist faction in Labour's history and in the 1980s was effectively Britain's fifth most important political party.<sup>1</sup>

Entrism is a political tactic by which a group encourages its members to infiltrate another, usually larger, organisation from below with the intention of subverting the larger organisation's policies. The tactic was popular among the Marxist left in Britain as they believed that the masses, owing to their lack of understanding of Marxism, often took the road of least resistance by voting for, or joining, pre-existing political parties. The British Communist Party initially tried to enter the Labour Party by openly applying for affiliation in 1920; its applications, however, were always refused. In response, Labour created a Proscribed List of organisations ineligible for affiliation. However, this merely caused Marxist groups to go underground and conduct entrisism in secret.

Many Marxist groups have tried, and largely failed, to infiltrate the Labour Party. Yet, by the 1970s, the Militant Tendency's pursuit of entrisism began to bear some fruit with the group taking effective control of the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS) in 1970 and over constituency politics in Liverpool by the early 1980s. In this period sales of the *Militant* newspaper also markedly increased and membership of the group rose sharply from 100 in 1965, to 1,621 in 1979, and 8,100 by 1986.<sup>2</sup> However, these victories brought with them the glare of Labour's National Executive Committee



(NEC). The NEC commissioned reports on Militant in 1975, 1977, 1982 and 1986, each of which highlighted that the group – which as an entrism sect had its own programme, principles and policies – was in contravention of Labour's constitution. In 1982, the Militant Tendency was officially proscribed by the party, thereby making its members ineligible for Labour membership. This decision led directly to the expulsion of the *Militant* editorial board in 1983 and the expulsion of eight Militant activists in Liverpool in 1986.

### The Revolutionary Socialist League: the beginnings of entrism 1955–64

The forerunner to the Militant Tendency was the Revolutionary Socialist League, which formed in 1955. During its first annual conference in 1957, the League clearly spelled out their belief in entrism: 'What is demanded now is the sinking of roots in the mass organisations and the steeling of a cadre.'<sup>3</sup> However, internally, arguments continued about the purpose and prospects of the entrism tactic.<sup>4</sup> In response to this, the group's co-founder, Ted Grant, wrote an internal pamphlet in 1959 entitled 'The Problems of Entrism'. This document emphasised that: 'it would be the height of stupidity to abandon the work in the Labour Party now and launch into independent adventures'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, far from withdrawing the League's 'forces' from the Labour Party, Grant argued that his organisation should send more of their recruits 'to prepare the way for total entry'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, as there was nothing 'outside the Labour movement', according to Grant, his group were directed to infiltrate the Labour Party in order to influence their policy making and structures towards a revolutionary ideal.<sup>7</sup>

At the League's 1962 annual conference, it adopted its Constitution. This document again advocated the policy of entrism stating that: 'All members of the R.S.L. are required to enter the mass organisations of the working class under the directions of the organisation and its organs for the purposes of fulfilling the aims of the organisation.'<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in a section that would later bring the group into conflict with Labour's NEC, the League also made plain the total control the group expected to exert over its members, even after they had entered other groups: 'All members holding public office, paid or otherwise, shall come under the complete control of the organisation and its organs.'<sup>9</sup>

Much of the League's early energy was spent on the publication of a newspaper, beginning in 1956. This served two purposes, firstly as a potential tool for new recruits, and secondly as a rallying call for existing members who often sold the newspaper. This publication went through many guises, beginning in 1956 as the *Workers' International Review*, funded by the Trotskyist Fourth International, and renamed *Socialist Fight* the following

year.<sup>10</sup> However, it was not until after the establishment of the *Militant* newspaper in 1964 that the group began to attract widespread attention. While founding editor Peter Taaffe would claim that ‘*Militant* was for Labour but with Socialist policies’, the first edition starkly pointed towards the newspaper’s independence: ‘The most important thing is that we wish to tell the truth to the working class against the lies and the exaggerations of the capitalist class and the half-truths of Labour’s officialdom.’<sup>11</sup> *Militant* initially denied any connection to the Revolutionary Socialist League, in order to stress that Militant supporters did not have their own constitution or staff outside of the Labour Party framework. However, since the opening of their archives and the private papers of co-founder Jimmy Deane, this has proven to be false, with numerous Militant activists – including Taaffe, Pat Wall, Terry Harrison and Tony Mulhearn – having attended League meetings.<sup>12</sup>

### Increasing influence: the Militant Tendency 1964–75

While the establishment of the *Militant* newspaper was undoubtedly a watershed moment, a year after its establishment the group could still only claim around 100 members.<sup>13</sup> A combination of newspaper activity, coupled with infiltration into student ranks and the establishment of a local power base in Liverpool, by the early 1970s, began to bear some fruit. These tactics, coupled with the declining membership of the Labour Party enabled Militant, through their tactic of entrism, to take effective control of a small number of local Labour parties and, crucially, Labour’s official youth wing – the LPYS.

Beginning in 1966 the Revolutionary Socialist League, now identifying itself as a Militant ‘Tendency’, published a number of strategic documents entitled ‘British Perspectives and Tasks’. Early editions of these documents while continuing to advocate the policy of entrism, spent far more time on the Tendency’s perspectives about the coming demise of capitalism, than on the group’s tasks.<sup>14</sup> However, Militant increasingly focused on one particular task: the infiltration of Labour’s youth wing. The Tendency was quite clear that the only way to take over the Labour Party was from below and an impressionable youth wing – with a failing membership and scant national leadership – was the perfect organisation in which to begin this task. As early as 1966, the Tendency recognised the need to ‘promote a new influx into the Labour Party of younger and fresher elements’.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, in 1968 Militant proclaimed that: ‘the whole of our work has evidenced it is among the youth that the ideas of Marxism will gain the firmest and most enthusiastic adherents’.<sup>16</sup> A year earlier, a Militant supporter had been elected for the first time to the LPYS National Committee and,

by 1970, Militant had achieved a majority on this committee.<sup>17</sup> For Militant the capture of Labour's youth wing was an incredible source of finance, recruits and power. The Young Socialists had their own newspaper, *Left*, which after 1970 effectively became a soundboard for the *Militant* newspaper. The 1971 edition of 'British Perspectives and Tasks' highlighted the successes of Militant's policies within Labour's youth wing:

The revival and development of the Young Socialists since the elections is a decisive confirmation of the correctness of the perspective of the tendency. It is a complete vindication of the theory and policies which we have put forward. It provides perhaps the most important field of work in which the tendency can grow swiftly and provides a sound springboard for further penetration of the Labour Movement.<sup>18</sup>

Militant's influence within Labour's youth section continued to grow and in 1972, unaware of the deep roots Militant's entristm had dug into the Young Socialists, Labour's NEC voted to give a place on their committee to the LPYS. This decision gave Militant a seat at Labour's top table. Barring a six-month period in 1974, after the Militant representative was forced to resign, the Tendency held this position, through a number of candidates, from its inception until 1990–91.<sup>19</sup>

In the immediate years following the founding of *Militant* in 1964, the Tendency – even outside of the youth wing of the Labour Party – could claim some quite significant gains. By 1970, they had taken effective control of Labour's Young Socialists and by 1971 Militant had purchased its own headquarters and even acquired a printing press.<sup>20</sup> In addition, in 1971, the *Militant* newspaper began to be printed fortnightly as opposed to monthly and, in January 1972, this moved to weekly. Moreover, as a further indication of the group's increasing resources, by this period they also employed four full-time staff.<sup>21</sup>

Although youth infiltration was undoubtedly the number one priority of the Tendency, they were keen to extend their influence into the wider Labour Party at constituency and ward level. In 1971, Militant identified the need to infiltrate 'General Management Councils and wards'.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the 1974 edition of 'British Perspectives and Tasks', began to focus more closely on the Tendency's future tasks in the wider labour movement. The paper recognised the work that had already begun in the constituencies: 'We have the early beginnings of influence and support within the Labour Party.'<sup>23</sup> But more importantly, the paper clearly stated the entrism task at hand:

We must dig roots in the wards and constituencies as we have in the Young Socialists (YS) ... The YS branches where we have support are already a springboard for work in the wards and General Management Committees. We must draw the YS into the work in the constituency parties. A period of

upheavals and changes on a far more extended scale is opening up in the Labour Party. Enormous opportunities will open up and we must be ready organisationally and politically to take advantage of them.<sup>24</sup>

Such entrism in wards and constituencies continued to be espoused in the 'British Perspectives and Tasks' documents throughout the 1970s.<sup>25</sup>

Alongside such developments, Militant was also beginning by the early 1970s to make strides in the Labour Party as a whole, as evidenced by support for Militant platforms at the Labour Party Conference. At the 1972 Labour Party Conference, Militant members Ray Apps and Pat Wall proposed a motion calling for the 'public ownership of major monopolies'.<sup>26</sup> This was essentially Militant's flagship policy and the conference, largely unaware that Apps and Wall were members of Militant, passed the motion by 3,501,000 votes to 2,497,000.<sup>27</sup> The increase in Militant's influence within the Labour Party can also be seen by the rising vote for their candidates in the annual Labour NEC elections. Apps received 31,000 votes in 1971, Pat Craven received 51,000 the following year and, in 1973, Apps stood again and received 81,000 votes.<sup>28</sup> Despite these achievements, and even with the Tendency's control of the Young Socialists, Militant membership stood at merely 517 by 1974. Yet, by this stage, the rise of Militant did have the unwelcome consequence for the group of capturing the glare of the Labour Party leadership.

### **Catching the attention of the Labour Party: the Underhill Reports 1975–80**

Between 1975 and 1979, Reg Underhill, Labour's National Agent, produced a number of reports in an effort to highlight the unconstitutional activities of Militant, but a left-leaning NEC thwarted his quest for action. In September 1975, with Militant now in a dominant position within the LPYS and slowly increasing their influence in the constituencies, the NEC agreed to allow Underhill to prepare a report on Trotskyist entrism in the Labour Party. Intriguingly, in the backdrop of these events, on Underhill's advice, the party had abolished its list of proscribed organisations – groups ineligible for membership of the party – in 1973.<sup>29</sup>

Underhill's 1975 report, entitled 'Entrist Activities', was a fairly brief exposé of Militant's activities based on extracts from Tendency publications. Underhill concluded that these documents, particularly referencing the 1974 edition of 'British Perspectives and Tasks', confirmed to him 'beyond any doubt whatever that there is a central organisation associated with Militant with its own membership and full-time organisers'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, drawing a parallel with his opposition to the Proscribed List in the early 1970s, Underhill's intention at this point was merely to alert the Labour leadership to the

problem, not to expel Militant from the party. The Organisation Committee of Labour's NEC, which considered Underhill's report, resolved 'that the matter be left on the table', essentially shelving any possible action.<sup>31</sup> The full NEC, by a vote of sixteen to twelve, confirmed that no further action would be taken due to unreliable witnesses and statements.<sup>32</sup> Militant were fully aware of these discussions, launching a full-throated attack in September 1975 on the front page of *Militant* entitled: 'Witch-Hunt Will Fail'.<sup>33</sup> In response, Labour's NEC, keen to stress that their investigation was not, in fact, a 'witch-hunt', unanimously voted in December 1976 for an Eric Heffer motion that denounced 'witch-hunts' in the party.<sup>34</sup>

Militant's entristm reared its head again in the autumn of 1976 with the appointment of Andy Bevan, a leading Militant within the LPYS, as Labour's Youth Officer. Despite protests from Jim Callaghan and other senior Labour figures, Bevan was confirmed in his position as – owing to his reputation as an effective organiser – he had quite legitimately won the support of an NEC sub-committee.<sup>35</sup> This appointment, coupled with the leaking of elements of Underhill's 1975 report to the press, brought Militant back into the headlines. After further internal Militant documents were passed to Underhill, the NEC in January 1977 agreed to re-examine his evidence, setting up a sub-committee to investigate 'allegations about entristm'.<sup>36</sup> This sub-committee noted 'with concern a number of reports ... of entrist activities in Constituency Parties', but again fell short of demanding action against Militant. Crucially their report stated that the NEC: 'believes that Trotskyist views cannot be beaten by disciplinary action'.<sup>37</sup> The proposed solution for dealing with Militant was through an intensive membership drive and political education, particularly in the Young Socialists. These conclusions, in a brief four-page report, were ultimately published to the wider party after a further NEC meeting in May.<sup>38</sup>

### **The beginnings of a conflict: the Register and the return of Proscription 1980–83**

The conduct of Militant would resurface after Underhill leaked documents to the press following his retirement in 1979. Labour's former National Agent, now Lord Underhill, published extracts from twenty Militant documents, which he had been collecting for over a decade, in a twenty-nine-page report entitled 'The Entryist Activities of the Militant Tendency'. He claimed that: 'the old mole of the revolution is burrowing away underneath the already disturbed surface of events'.<sup>39</sup> Underhill's release of these documents caused a press storm with, among others, the *Daily Mail* devoting a double-page spread to the revelations entitled 'The Menacing Moles' and *The Telegraph* featuring a front-page article on 'Labour's Trotskyist Moles'.<sup>40</sup>

By the early 1980s the unwelcome publicity about the Labour Party's inaction on the Militant question over the previous decade, in the face of what appeared to be overwhelming evidence – now presented for all to see in the national press – began to change opinions at the top of the party. Michael Foot, who had played a major role in suppressing Underhill's 1975 report, by around 1981 realised that Militant – growing increasingly large in influence and membership – was a faction within the party that had to be dealt with. On 9 December 1981, Foot called for an inquiry into the activities of the Militant Tendency at an NEC Organisation sub-committee and this was narrowly carried by ten votes to nine, with Neil Kinnock's vote providing the majority.<sup>41</sup> The NEC ratified this resolution eight days later by the surprisingly large margin of nineteen to ten. The comprehensive resolution had a widespread remit:

This Committee instructs the General Secretary and the National Agent to provide a report on the activities of the Militant Tendency and whether these conflict with Clause II(3) of the constitution of the Labour Party; to obtain from the organisers of Militant Tendency details of the scale of their operations within the Labour Party.<sup>42</sup>

Underhill's successor as National Agent, David Hughes, was appointed, alongside Ron Hayward, the party's General Secretary, to examine if Militant were in contravention of Labour's constitution.

The constitutional issue was particularly contentious. Clause II(3) of Labour's constitution stated that:

Political organisations not affiliated to or associated under a National Agreement with the Party on January 1, 1946, having their own Programme, Principles and Policy for distinctive and separate propaganda, or possessing Branches in the Constituencies or engaged in the promotion of Parliamentary or Local Government Candidatures, or owing allegiance to any political organisation situation abroad, shall be ineligible for affiliation to the Party.<sup>43</sup>

This rule had initially been drawn up to prevent the Communist Party from being able to affiliate and ultimately led the communists to pursue entristm for a brief period before abandoning the strategy in 1940.<sup>44</sup> Underhill had previously argued that the Labour Party's constitution provided an adequate safeguard to infiltration when proposing the scrapping of the Proscribed List in 1973. Though while Labour's constitutional protection against such groups appeared quite strong, the party would have to prove that Militant was a separate organisation with its own 'Programme, Principles and Policy' in order to take action against it. However, Militant continued to deny links with the Revolutionary Socialist League and maintained that they were merely a group, centred around a newspaper, similar to *Tribune*.

Hayward wrote to Militant in December 1981 informing them of the NEC's decision to request a report on the Tendency's activities and demanded a wealth of information from the group regarding their finances, members and structure.<sup>45</sup> Militant replied in full, as they had in 1980 when responding to a voluntary request for information from the NEC.<sup>46</sup> Militant's editors argued strongly that *Militant* was not a separate organisation with its own 'Programme, Principles and Policy', stressing that their readers' meetings were open to the public; that no pre-meeting caucusing in the constituencies was mandated by Militant; and that they did not hold an annual conference to determine group policy, but an annual supporters' rally that served as a discussion forum.<sup>47</sup> However, this response did not evoke sympathy within the Labour Party leadership.

When Hayward and Hughes published their report in June 1982, their noteworthy conclusion was the creation of a 'register of non-affiliated groups of members to be recognised and allowed to operate within the Party'.<sup>48</sup> This move was the first step in seeking to re-establish centrist control within the Labour Party since the abolition of the Proscribed List in 1973.<sup>49</sup> The authors concluded:

It is clear to us that the Militant Tendency is not a group formed solely to support a newspaper. It has a hard-core of supporters who form an organisation with its own programme and policy for distinctive and separate propaganda which is determined outside the structure of the Labour Party.<sup>50</sup>

The NEC passed the report by sixteen votes to ten.<sup>51</sup> In creating the Register, Hayward and Hughes explicitly stated: 'It is our opinion that the Militant Tendency as presently constituted would not be eligible to be included on the proposed Register.'<sup>52</sup>

The Register brought with it huge legal implications alongside charges of inconsistency. For instance, Trade Unions for a Labour Victory was not made up entirely of Labour Party members, which put the group, using Hayward and Hughes' outline, at risk of not being allowed to register. Similarly, during the registration process both Labour Friends of Israel and Labour Movement for Europe openly admitted that major sources of their income came from outside the British labour movement, in contravention of Hayward and Hughes' recommendations. As such, these groups were not allowed to register, but the NEC decided that in these cases no disciplinary steps should be taken. Thus, Militant was keen to point out such inconsistencies.

In the backdrop to these events, Mortimer wrote to Militant on 1 July 1982, asking the group to submit any application for the Register at an 'early date'. In addition, as Militant had been explicitly singled out in the Hayward-Hughes report as posing a constitutional problem, this letter also stated: 'it will be also necessary for you to indicate the changes you are making to



implement the NEC's decision to conform to the constitution of the Party'.<sup>53</sup> In September 1982, Mortimer reported to the NEC that there had been no response from Militant to the invitation to register. However, this report did recognise that 'any action which the NEC may consider taking should be directed against the small number responsible for organising a political group in contravention of Clause II(3). It would be harmful if action were initiated on a wider scale.'<sup>54</sup> This was a conclusion widely shared within the Labour Party leadership who continued to profess their opposition to witch-hunts and expulsions, but recognised the need to cut the head off the increasingly influential Militant faction. However, the Register, despite the public pronouncement that all groups – and not just Militant – had to apply for affiliation, was a somewhat underhanded, and as we have seen inconsistently applied, tool to oust the Militant Tendency from the Labour Party. That the Register was used as the tool to attack Militant displayed the party leadership's fear that a widespread purge would not receive the backing of Labour's left-wing. By this point Militant had operated as an entrust faction within the Labour Party for eighteen years. Only when the group's ideas began to take hold – first in the Young Socialists and then in a few constituencies such as Liverpool and Bradford – did the Labour leadership begin to insist on the vigorous application of Clause II(3) of the party's constitution.

At the 1982 Labour Party Conference, Mortimer addressing the issue of Militant, stated that it was the duty of the NEC, under Clause IX(2)d of the party's constitution to 'enforce the standing orders and rules of the party'.<sup>55</sup> It followed then that in his view the party must now decisively deal with the entrust activities of Militant:

*Militant* is not just a newspaper. The Militant Tendency is an organised faction – an organised party – within the Labour Party. It has, first, its own long-term programme, principles and policy. This can be ascertained by reading its documents. Secondly, it has its own organised disciplined structure at local, district and national level. Thirdly, it has its own core of full-time organisers ... It has its own publishing house... its own fundraising organisation ... its own caucus groups.<sup>56</sup>

Following Mortimer's introduction to the NEC's report on the Register, the conference debated both the report and composite 49 which opposed 'all bans, proscriptions, witch-hunts and proscribed lists'.<sup>57</sup> In the event, by a quite staggering margin, the conference affirmed the NEC report by 5,173,000 to 1,565,000, with composite 49 falling by 1,645,000 to 5,227,000.<sup>58</sup> Although Militant were keen to point out that nine-tenths of constituency parties actually voted against the imposition of the Register and it was, in their view, the non-democratic trade union bloc which swayed the vote to the leadership.<sup>59</sup>



Despite the 1982 conference decision, Militant continued to battle against the Register through every available avenue. In October 1982, in a clever twist, Militant declared that as the request to register was sent out before any conference decision was made, it was not legally binding. Furthermore, in a lengthy document authored by Taaffe, Militant argued that: 'The Register replaces the old and completely discredited Proscribed List with a new but equally undemocratic *Prescribed* List.'<sup>60</sup> Moreover, they continued to stress that 'Militant is not a separate political party, nor is it ancillary or subsidiary to any other party or organisation.'<sup>61</sup> However, despite these protestations Militant made it clear that they wished to be placed on the Register. They also attacked the NEC's decision on a second ground, natural justice. As Militant – the defendant – had not been allowed to examine or comment upon the evidence by which the NEC had determined that they were in contravention of Labour's constitution, the party was open to legal challenge. The threat of legal action from Militant over these issues led a humiliating climb-down for Mortimer who was forced to withdraw his proposals for the Register.

#### Towards expulsions: the *Militant* editorial board 1982–83

Despite the failure of the Register the Labour Party leadership had crossed the Rubicon and by 1982 were determined to tackle Militant's entrism by any means. Consequently, Mortimer now concluded that, while the NEC – on legal advice – did not, as Militant claimed, have the power under Clause II(3) of the Labour Party's Constitution to act against the Tendency, Labour did have the right to proscribe organisations under Clause II(4)b. The latter clause related to the conditions for Labour Party membership, specifically that members could not be 'members of Political Parties or organisations ancillary or subsidiary thereto declared by the Annual Conference of the Labour Party or by the NEC in pursuance of the conference decisions to be ineligible for affiliation to the Party'.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the NEC's next step was to officially proscribe Militant. This was somewhat of an embarrassment for the party as the 'Proscribed List', which had been scrapped in 1973 as a sign of progress, was starkly associated with the internal infighting of the 1950s.

In December 1982 the NEC decreed that Militant, 'as a Trotskyite entrism group' was 'ineligible for affiliation to the Labour Party'.<sup>63</sup> The vote was passed by eighteen to nine. Militant continued to argue for the right to receive and comment on the evidence that had been used to come to such a conclusion, but on a technicality – that Militant should have issued a legal challenge sooner – their pleas for natural justice was dismissed by the courts.<sup>64</sup> At the following NEC meeting in January 1983 two resolutions were passed, the first detailed that under Rule II(4)b members of the Militant Tendency

were 'liable to expulsion from the Party', but the resolution did afford such members 'the opportunity to make written and oral representations'.<sup>65</sup> The second resolution provided Militant members the chance to renounce their membership and/or financial support for the Tendency at the expulsion hearings.

Before the hearings, in a letter dated 3 February 1983, Mortimer specifically forwarded the charge on which the five members of the Militant editorial board – Grant, Taaffe, Clare Doyle, Lynn Walsh and Keith Dickinson – would stand accused:

The allegation against you is that as a member of the Editorial Board of 'Militant' you are actively involved in the organisation and activity of the Militant Tendency and may, therefore, fairly and reasonably be regarded as a member of the Militant Tendency ... The National Executive Committee decided that Militant Tendency is not eligible for affiliation to the Party and that members of the Militant Tendency cannot, therefore, under the rules of the Party (Clause (II)4) be individual members of the Party.<sup>66</sup>

The editorial board was invited to attend a meeting on 23 February 1983 to answer these allegations. At this meeting Taaffe, who answered most questions on behalf of the group, fully admitted that he was a member of the editorial board but continued to deny that anyone was a member of a Militant Tendency.<sup>67</sup> In doing so, he drew a clear distinction between the *Militant* newspaper and the 'alleged entrust organisation', Militant Tendency. After two hours of cross-examination, the NEC accepted, by nineteen votes to nine, John Golding's motion that the five members of the editorial board 'should be expelled forthwith'.<sup>68</sup> Militant appealed this verdict at the 1983 Labour Party Conference, however, all five expulsions were upheld by 5:1 margins.<sup>69</sup> In Golding's words the Militant vampire was, by this decision, 'impaled on the wooden stake'.<sup>70</sup>

### The Liverpool Inquiry 1985–86

The expulsion of the *Militant* editorial board did not spell the end of Militant as a force within the Labour Party. While in some areas Militant continued to extend its influence, such as the election of Militant supporters Terry Fields and Dave Nellist at the 1983 general election, in others their influence continued to wane after the 1983 expulsions. Following the election defeat, the July NEC meeting banned the sale of *Militant* at all Labour Party meetings and prohibited the Tendency from using party facilities.<sup>71</sup> Although in this period Militant kept growing in numbers, reaching 8,100 supporters by 1986, the group experienced significant difficulties in controlling their supporters. Moreover, due to the leadership's action across the Labour movement – in

the trade unions, the Young Socialists and the Constituencies – Militant's influence was rolled back.<sup>72</sup> However, up to 1986 Militant maintained one impermeable fortress, Liverpool.

The entrisism of the Militant Tendency returned to the top of the NEC's agenda in 1985, principally around the conduct of Liverpool's Labour-controlled Council. Although the Militant councillors of Liverpool Labour Group did not internally ever hold an outright majority, their policies and anti-cuts rhetoric resonated with the rest of the Liverpool Labour Group, the District Labour Party (DLP), and even to some extent with the public. Militant's real power base was Liverpool DLP where years of entrisism had resulted in Militant activists taking the key executive positions: Tony Mulhearn as Chairman, Terry Harrison as Vice-Chair, and Felicity Dowling as Secretary. Through this stronghold the DLP *de jure* controlled the selection of Council candidates, and *de facto* developed policy and strategy for the Council's Labour Group. The success of these entrist tactics also extended into the Council with Derek Hatton elected as the Labour Group's Deputy Leader and Chair of the powerful Personnel Committee that controlled Council appointments. Thus, in many ways, Liverpool's Labour Council was very much a Militant inspired council. Militant's reach even went as far as parliamentary selections with Militant supporter Terry Fields elected as the MP for Liverpool Broadgreen in 1983.

The issue that brought Liverpool Council to the attention of the NEC was their opposition to rate capping. In response to the Conservative government's cuts to local spending power, Liverpool Council had achieved some success in 1984 by refusing to set a legal budget, forcing the government to provide an extra £20 million of funding.<sup>73</sup> However, when the Militant-tinged Council, under the direction of Liverpool DLP, tried to repeat the trick in 1985, they encountered much sterner resistance from the Conservatives. With Liverpool Council showing no signs of backing down and widespread redundancies looking increasingly likely, Kinnock took to the stage at the 1985 Labour Party Conference to denounce the actions of Militant:

I'll tell you what happens with impossible promises. You start with far-fetched resolutions. They are then pickled into a rigid dogma, a code, and you go through the years sticking to that, out-dated, misplaced, irrelevant to the real needs, and you end in the grotesque chaos of a Labour council – a Labour council – hiring taxis to scuttle round a city handing out redundancy notices to its own workers.<sup>74</sup>

The speech signalled the Labour Party leadership's forthcoming attack on Militant. Kinnock saw the crisis as a chance to demonstrate to the wider party, and to the public, that the views of the 'hard' left would not be tolerated if they put jobs and services at risk. The party leader summed this attitude

up in a succinct soundbite declaring that: 'You can't play politics with people's jobs.'<sup>75</sup> Conference itself, bar a few catcalls from Liverpool delegates, welcomed Kinnock's comments with rapturous applause.

Following Kinnock's speech, the Labour leadership set about the task of examining Militant's entrisism into Liverpool District Labour Party. Tom Sawyer – Deputy General Secretary of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) – has often been credited for proposing the inquiry into the DLP to the NEC,<sup>76</sup> but in reality this was a joint effort between an embryonic 'soft' left current – which included alongside Sawyer, David Blunkett, Michael Meacher and Eddie Haigh – coordinated by Kinnock. At the NEC on 27 November 1985, Blunkett proposed a motion calling for an inquiry into Liverpool DLP, to which Sawyer proposed an amendment – seconded by Kinnock – stating that the inquiry team should be drawn from the NEC itself and that the DLP should be suspended until the investigation was completed.<sup>77</sup> The motion amended was carried by twenty-one votes to five; the five being Blunkett and Sawyer's former allies on the 'hard' left: Eric Heffer, Tony Benn, Margaret Beckett, Dennis Skinner and Frances Curran.

The inquiry team itself comprised of eight executive members from across the political spectrum. Sawyer recorded in his diary that it was 'well balanced between left and right', but recognised its limitations stating: 'I doubt if we can make a majority recommendation.'<sup>78</sup> Michael Crick, however, has demonstrated that Sawyer may have understated his own power on the committee, stating that the 'initiative effectively lay with two soft-left unionists – Eddie Haigh of the TGWU, and Tom Sawyer of NUPE'.<sup>79</sup> Crick's assertion is correct. The 'hard' left members of the committee (Audrey Wise and Margaret Beckett) had consistently voted against expulsions, whereas the more moderate/centrist members (Betty Boothroyd, Charlie Turnock, Neville Hough and Eric Clarke) largely went to Liverpool looking to purge Militants from the DLP. Sawyer took his place on the inquiry team having previously voted against the expulsion of the *Militant* editorial board in 1983, but increasingly perturbed by the stories emerging from Liverpool. Thus, the real swing votes of the eight-member group were those of the 'soft' left: Haigh and Sawyer.

The inquiry itself had a profound impact on Sawyer and its effects led to a final break between the 'soft' and 'hard' left on the Labour Party's NEC. The horrors witnessed in Liverpool moved Sawyer away from the 'hard' left into advocating the expulsion of key members of the DLP. The inquiry in Liverpool heard detailed accounts of the abuses of the Militant-tinged Labour Party in Liverpool: the intimidation of opponents, the use of the Static Security Force to police DLP meetings, reports of physical violence and unacceptable employment practices.<sup>80</sup> In a recent interview, Sawyer has reflected on the inquiry, describing how the visible impact of Militant's entrisism in

Liverpool on his own trade union members led to his *volte-face*. He was particularly influenced by Jane Kennedy, NUPE's Branch Secretary for Liverpool and the future MP for Liverpool Broadgreen:

Jane had a room full of trade union members who told me basically what had happened to them due to this branch in Liverpool controlled by Militant. You couldn't get a job as a school caretaker. If you went the Council and said, 'can I have a job as a caretaker?' they would say, 'go and see Branch Five', if you said, 'but excuse me I want an application form', they would say, 'we can't give you one, Mr. Hatton, the Personnel Chairman, has passed a motion that all personnel application forms have to go through the union.' So you would have had to go to the union and say, 'can I have a job?' and if you were not a member of Militant, they wouldn't have given you a job. It was outrageous. Well, I felt terribly naïve actually and stupid, I had never seen this in my lifetime.<sup>81</sup>

This quote highlights the extent of Militant's entrism, with their power extending from the local Labour Party right through into the trade unions and the Council.

At the conclusion of the inquiry's investigation into Liverpool DLP no unanimous report could be agreed between the eight members on the way to deal with Militant's entrism. Thus, two reports were produced. A minority report, endorsed by the left-wingers Wise and Beckett, recognised that Liverpool DLP needed to reform itself, principally around the conduct of its delegate meetings, but crucially signalled its authors' opposition to expulsions: 'we must disassociate ourselves from any suggestion that expulsion of members of the Liverpool DLP should be recommended'.<sup>82</sup> The majority report, put forward by Sawyer, Haigh, Turnock, Boothroyd, Hough and Clarke drew very different conclusions on principally two issues: number one, the organisation of the DLP; and number two, Militant's entrism. On the first issue, the majority report stated that: 'we are convinced that certain key members on the DLP Executive who dominate the key decision making groups in the city are beyond reasonable doubt heavily involved in the Militant organisation'.<sup>83</sup> To remedy this situation the report recommended the suspension of the Executive Committee of the DLP. On the second point, regarding Militant's entrism, the majority report stated:

It is beyond reasonable doubt that the Militant Tendency is an organisation with its 'own programme, principles, and policy for distinctive and separate propaganda, possessing branches in the constituencies'. Members of Militant Tendency would therefore be ineligible for membership under Clause II(4)b of the Constitution of the Labour Party.<sup>84</sup>

Due to this conclusion, the report's final recommendation was 'that the General Secretary be instructed to consider the evidence relating to possible

membership of Militant Tendency against the persons named below and where applicable to formulate charges against them to be heard at the NEC'.<sup>85</sup>

Sawyer recorded his own conclusions in a diary entry dated 28 February 1986, after the Labour Party's NEC had endorsed the majority report:

The most fundamental lesson for me is that Liverpool has shown the Militant Tendency in power and all that meant for the workforce and the unions in Liverpool. I had to go back and think about Militant Tendency in more basic terms and I was forcefully reminded that their existence is based on a lie, the decision to enter the Labour Party. The first lie is followed by a second – to have full time organisers. A third to have its own funds and so on until we have a mountain of lies one after the other ... I don't like what I saw in Liverpool.<sup>86</sup>

Yet, despite this Sawyer and Haigh did not advocate widespread expulsions. Interestingly, a slight indication of dissent between the signatories of the majority report can be seen regarding the sixteen names put forward for possible suspension. Five Militants on the list 'were agreed by four members of the team only', whereas the remainder were agreed by all six signatories of the report. The dissenting members of the majority committee on this matter were the 'soft' left signatories, Sawyer and Haigh.<sup>87</sup> This shows that while Haigh and Sawyer had been convinced to back the expulsions due to the exceptional circumstances presented by the Liverpool inquiry, they maintained an independent position on some items.

Through legal action Militant managed to stop members of the inquiry team from voting at the full NEC on the expulsions of the sixteen names put forward in their report, citing a conflict of interest and the lack of an open mind.<sup>88</sup> This led to a mini-crisis when the Militant expulsions were to be voted upon at the June NEC. Owing to the ineligibility of the inquiry members, the remaining 'hard' left members of the NEC walked out of the meeting in protest, rendering it inquorate.<sup>89</sup> This caused a hasty revision of the party's rules to reduce the quorum, and in the end eight of the sixteen accused – including Hatton, Mulhearn, Harrison and Dowling – were expelled.<sup>90</sup>

### **The open turn and conclusion**

The expulsions of senior Militant Tendency members from the editorial board in 1983, and from the organisation's stronghold in Liverpool in 1986, terminally weakened both the group's power base and its commitment towards the entrism tactic. The Tendency was able to claim one further high-profile scalp with the election Militant supporter Pat Wall as the MP for Bradford North in 1987, however, post-Liverpool their influence was very much on

the decline. Although the *Militant* newspaper continued to be produced and the group still commanded large support at their rallies – including attracting over 8,000 supporters in 1986 at Alexandra Palace – their entrism activities by the late 1980s had largely been halted by the group's proscription. Following the Liverpool inquiry, Labour continued to purge Militant from the constituencies with more than 200 members of the Tendency being expelled from the party by 1991.<sup>91</sup> Recognising that their entrism activities within the Labour Party, in the face of stiff opposition, were no longer likely to succeed, Militant began to debate if the cause of Marxism would be better served outside of the party.

At the end of the 1980s Militant's work outside the Labour Party began to take shape, receiving widespread publicity for their anti-poll tax campaign and associated demonstrations. These moderate successes led to the decision to set up Scottish Militant Labour, in 1991, an organisation entirely separate from the Scottish Labour Party, with no plans for entrism. Thereafter Militant supported five Independent Broad Left candidates, standing against official Labour Party candidates for Liverpool Council. Moreover, following the death of Eric Heffer, in the 1991 Liverpool Walton by-election the group backed Lesley Mahmood as the 'Real Labour' candidate against the official Labour Party candidate Peter Kilfoyle.

Such decisions, however, provoked controversy among the Militant leadership. In July 1991 majority and minority resolutions were put to Militant's Executive Board on the future of the group. Grant, arguing for the minority position, proclaimed that a decision to leave the Labour Party would threaten '40 years of entrism work'.<sup>92</sup> Whereas Taaffe, arguing for the majority position, advocated setting up an entirely independent, open organisation with no plans for entry into the Labour Party.<sup>93</sup> The Executive Board ultimately decided, by forty-six votes to three, to endorse the majority position and to abandon entrism in the Labour Party. This 'open turn' resulted in the foundation of Militant Labour 1991, which became the Socialist Party in 1996. The group continues sporadically to contest local and national elections across Britain, fighting against Labour Party candidates, with little success. Accusations about the return of entrism in the Labour Party returned in 2015 with the left-turn signalled by the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, the mass increase in party membership, and the foundation of Momentum.<sup>94</sup> But the Socialist Party, successor to Militant and the Revolutionary Socialist League, very much remains on the side-line of British politics.

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## Understanding the formation of the Communist Party of Britain

*Lawrence Parker*

While the rebellion of the *Morning Star* under its editor Tony Chater has been fairly well documented in writing on the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB's) factional battles of the 1980s,<sup>1</sup> the circumstances surrounding the foundation and first decade of the breakaway Communist Party of Britain (CPB), a 1988 split from the old CPGB, are more obscure.

The Communist Campaign Group (CCG, the CPB's forerunner) was unsuccessful in uniting its preferred constituency, party trade unionists; and the Chater group appears to have alienated many CPGB oppositionists due to its tactics and agitation for a split. Thus, the CPB was something of a stillborn enterprise. It did manage to group together wider layers of people who had been oppositionists in the old CPGB as the 1990s wore on but, by the middle of the decade, this process had pushed initial leadership figures such as Mike Hicks, Mary Rosser and others into hostility towards those who were perceived to have been oppositional rivals in the 1980s. These events led to a long-running factional war that culminated in the retaliatory sacking of John Haylett as *Morning Star* editor by Mary Rosser in 1998 and a strike by the paper's journalists in the same year. Thus, the divisions in the CPGB at the foundation of the CPB cast a long political shadow. Ultimately, the CPB was yet another left-wing organisation that illustrated the inherent unsuitability of bureaucratic centralism (i.e. a bastardised and over-centralised form of so-called 'Leninist' politics) to build anything other than small organisations with a propensity to spawn cliques and low-level splits.

The CPB was marked out from its rivals on two counts. First, it maintained a close relationship with the *Morning Star* daily newspaper, which did offer it a relationship, however attenuated, with the left of the trade union movement. Second, its adoption of a version of the CPGB's old programme, the

*British Road to Socialism (BRS)*, meant that it shared the same broad strategic impulse as many in the broader labour movement – a parliamentary road to socialism with the Labour Party centre stage.

The CPB likes to refer to itself as the continuation, or ‘re-establishment’, of the old CPGB, even though that is not how most British communists and even, perhaps, some of its own members saw it in 1988. Such habits have deep roots. In 1985, the CCG attempted to elevate itself above its factional rivals by declaring: ‘The Communist Campaign Group is *not* a faction. It exists not to violate or alter but to defend and promote the rules, constitution and programme of the Communist Party.’<sup>2</sup> It is through exploring this credibility gap, between the CPB’s ideal picture of itself and a harsher political reality, that a difficult birth and first decade can be understood.

### Origins

The origins of the CCG/CPB partially lay in the left pro-Soviet oppositions that emerged in the CPGB in the 1960s. In this period, a definite ‘party within a party’ emerged, with figures such as Sid French, District Secretary of Surrey CPGB, becoming key leaders. The general critique that emerged from this faction was a concern over the CPGB leadership distancing itself from the Soviet Union (such as around the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968) and other ‘socialist’ countries; a preference for a more ‘workerist’ identity and a concentration on workplaces/trade unions; and a sense that the party was squandering its resources in futile election contests and alienating the left of the Labour Party, with whom it was meant to be developing a close relationship on the *BRS*, the CPGB programme. However, a significant part of the faction felt that the *BRS* was ‘reformist’ and ‘revisionist’ in all its guises from 1951, counter-posing a revolutionary path to the parliamentary road to socialism envisaged in the CPGB’s existing programme.

This opposition suffered a major split in the run-up to the CPGB’s 1977 congress, with French taking away 700 or so supporters to form the New Communist Party. Immediately after this, the rump left opposition in the CPGB coalesced around Fergus Nicholson (who had been the CPGB’s student organiser until 1974) with a ‘broad’ labour movement newspaper *Straight Left* being launched in 1979.<sup>3</sup>

The CCG, which emerged around 1985, shared some but not all of these antecedents. It initially coalesced around two figures in the CPGB’s national bureaucracy: the editor of the party’s *Morning Star* daily newspaper since 1974, Tony Chater; and its national industrial organiser, Mick Costello.<sup>4</sup> The CCG was the inheritor of some of the CPGB left opposition’s ‘workerist’ predilections, and this was shown in the circumstances directly preceding its emergence.

In September 1982, *Marxism Today*, the CPGB's theoretical journal, then under control of Martin Jacques and Eurocommunist elements, published a critique of lower union officialdom, including shop stewards.<sup>5</sup> This was damned in the *Morning Star* by industrial organiser Mick Costello<sup>6</sup> and the *Marxism Today* article was heavily criticised by some of the party's trade union activists. Costello formed a bloc with Chater and, increasingly, Chater saw the paper as being independent of the CPGB. The party could not remove Chater from his post because the People's Press Printing Society (PPPS) that published the paper was formally a self-governing cooperative and it was this technical status, never used in this manner before, which Chater wielded against the CPGB leadership. Previously, it was always understood that the *Daily Worker/Morning Star* was the CPGB's paper and that the PPPS had merely been set up as an 'independent' body so as to ensure the continuation of the party's control in the face of any legal threats.<sup>7</sup> Chater went further in June 1983, claiming in the *Morning Star* that a 'powerful outside body' was trying to influence PPPS Management Committee elections – this 'outside body' being the CPGB itself.<sup>8</sup> The battle then moved into the PPPS itself and various AGMs, as the party leadership tried and failed to re-establish control. From these struggles arose the CCG in 1985, which initially had a very thin national infrastructure.<sup>9</sup>

This was a curious position for a communist oppositional force to be in. Chater and Costello were certainly voicing the sense of the party's leading trade unionists that the tide was turning against them and making a firm bid to engage that constituency. In the words of one hostile commentator: 'The party was beginning to break up into several opportunist cliques, all promoting "sectional" interests, and in this sense, comrade Costello was promoting trade unionism, not as an integral component of communist work, but as a "sectional" interest.'<sup>10</sup> On the other, effectively depriving the CPGB of its daily paper and declaring it to be an interloper meant that the CCG/CPB could never truly pose itself as the saviour of any kind of 'party' principle. Thus, even people who might have been expected to be natural supporters of Chater and Costello, such as former industrial organiser Bert Ramelson, while strongly critical of the CPGB Executive Committee's handling of the affair, felt 'the description of the CP as an "outside" body ... had been politically inept as well as inaccurate, except in the narrowest literalist way'.<sup>11</sup>

However, a note of caution needs to be observed in relation to this courtship of the CPGB's industrial base that had seemingly prospered in the 1960s and 1970s. As McIlroy notes: 'The picture suggested [from CPGB reports] was not a national community of political branches but rather a shallower, personalised network of trade union militants ... largely concerned with industrial issues, sometimes with limited attachment to the CP ...'.<sup>12</sup> The

party had never managed to properly rebuild its workplace organisation after dissolving its factory branches at the end of the Second World War. What had been rebuilt were in absolute decline, in line with the rest of the CPGB, with, for example, only twenty-six workplace branches in existence in 1978.<sup>13</sup> This electorate would have been an unlikely source of any true reinvigoration or re-establishment of communist politics in Britain.

### Political physiognomy

In terms of its ideology and beliefs, the CCG portrayed an ingrained conservatism to the rest of the party, perhaps inevitable in a formation that existed 'not to violate or alter but to defend and promote the rules, constitution and programme of the Communist Party'.<sup>14</sup> The crisis of the CPGB was boiled down to the issue of Eurocommunism and the then General Secretary Gordon McLennan: 'Since 1982 especially [McLennan] has allowed both himself and the Executive Committee to come under the total domination of the Eurocommunist faction.'<sup>15</sup> Attempts to trace back the crisis of the CPGB to earlier historical periods (as had been undertaken by elements of the left opposition of the 1960s and 1970s) were mostly eschewed by the CCG, which looked to have all the hallmarks of a somewhat amorphous gathering presenting a united face to the world in line with the practice of 'Leninism'. One CPB member later complained: 'the policy of the leading committees was to keep controversial debate to the minimum. Critical discussion of our programme was kept out of the [*Communist Campaign Review* – the journal of the CCG] etc., in a false sense of unity at all costs.'<sup>16</sup> This point is particularly pertinent given the radical elements that the CCG dragged in its wake, notably a group in South Wales around Robert Griffiths (later to become General Secretary of the CPB in 1998), which, far from defending the CPGB's current programme, traced the 'revisionism' of the *BRS*'s precursors back to the practice of former General Secretary Harry Pollitt around the period of the Popular Front and the Second World War. The *BRS* of 1951/52 was contemptuously dismissed as 'British special pleading for abandoning the very principle of [the] dictatorship of the proletariat'.<sup>17</sup> However, it seems to have been a conscious strategy on the part of leading figures to keep all this under wraps. A member of the CPB informed a US magazine in 1988 'that the CPB assessed it was correct to re-establish the party first on the basis of broad unity with the last published version of the CPGB's 'British road' and then proceed to debate the specifics of a new party [programme]'.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, this conservative approach in the name of 'broadness' could be seen as a narrowing agent in that it denied the CCG/CPB the chance to establish any of its own positive ideological dynamic in favour of a diplomatic 'business-as-usual' stance.

While the grouping that emerged from the dispute around the *Morning Star* could broadly be classed as ‘pro-Soviet’, it wasn’t slavish in the manner of Sid French’s faction or Straight Left. Chater had no particular record in regards to the tendency in the CPGB that looked to automatically bless everything that the Soviet Union did (the *Morning Star* had, for example, followed the CPGB Executive Committee’s condemnation of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the military crackdown in Poland) although some commentators have suggested that criticism of the Soviet bloc in the *Morning Star* began to recede after Chater had crossed swords with his party and needed the continued support of bulk orders from the Soviet bureaucracy.<sup>19</sup>

As the 1980s wore on, the *Morning Star* supported Gorbachev’s adoption of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and was broadly sympathetic to the popular revolts taking place in Eastern Europe at the end of the decade. Although the breakaway CPB remained broadly supportive of the Soviet experiment overall, it was critical of the exclusion of the working class from power in favour of state bureaucracies.<sup>20</sup> Such stances did not prove to be the source of major internal controversy in the CPB.

### Hubris and anti-hubris

A document issued by the CCG after the CPGB’s 1987 congress suggested that the host party was effectively finished: ‘All the purges; expulsions and exclusions; gerrymandering of branches and districts have prepared the way for the official transformation, at this congress of the Communist Party into a social-democratic party.’<sup>21</sup> Ray Colvin, editor of the *Communist Campaign Review* and soon to be on the initial Executive Committee (EC) of the CPB, said in a press conference on 8 January 1988 to announce a ‘re-established’ party: ‘The sad reality is that [the CPGB] exists in name only.’<sup>22</sup> A press statement released at this point said: ‘the demand for re-establishing the party, is welling up from the grass-roots of our party’.<sup>23</sup>

That this was not the case is evident from the speeches and interventions at the CPB’s re-establishment congress in London on 23–24 April 1988. The tone of these contributions by leading CPB members were seemingly – and commendably – without any of the hubris usually in attendance at such left-wing gatherings. Thus Chater, shortly to go on the CPB’s first EC, admitted: ‘There are many comrades opposed to the revisionists, including some who have been expelled [from the CPGB], who still have reservations about the re-establishment process we are initiating. We want to continue discussions with them and continue working with them. We reject all sectarianism and labelling.’<sup>24</sup> Mary Rosser, then chief executive of the *Morning Star*, took up this issue of reticence from an alternative angle: ‘There are



those who do not wish to join a re-established party and who do not want to join the CPGB. They suggest that the paper can substitute for a party, and that, in fact, there is no need to re-establish the party as the paper will fulfil this function.<sup>25</sup> One could obviously view this as a brutish consequence of Chater's radical re-ordering of the traditional party-paper hierarchy.

The major controversy of the 1988 congress, relations with a struggling New Communist Party (NCP) that had been launched eleven years earlier, also alluded to some of the concerns raised by Chater and Rosser. Trade unionist and party veteran Kevin Halpin said: 'Given the [CPB] executive's mandate that the re-established party is going ahead on the basis of the programme, rules and policy of the [CPGB], it would be an illusion to imagine that organisational unity with organisations opposed to this – such as the NCP – is a possibility.'<sup>26</sup> However, Derek Robinson, former convenor and shop steward inside British Leyland, and, like Halpin, shortly to join the CPB's first EC, asserted that 'we're going to have formal discussions with our comrades in the NCP and other communist organisations'.<sup>27</sup> This dispute was eventually resolved at the CPB's 1989 congress,<sup>28</sup> which voted in favour of a consultative conference on communist unity, with an inconsequential gathering with the NCP taking place in London in January 1991.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, this goes to the heart of the question of what had been achieved at the CPB's founding congress. Chater's sensible description of the 're-establishment *process*' (my emphasis) and the seeming appetite within CPB ranks for unity with marginal organisations such as the NCP rather cut against some of the hubris that was involved in adopting the decidedly non-provisional moniker of the Communist Party of Britain and claiming a direct line of descent from the CPGB formed in 1920, albeit with some caution in print. Thus, for example, a pamphlet issued in 1990 said: 'The CPB is now clearly the *inheritor of the traditions of the 70 years of struggle* of the Communist Party in Britain.'<sup>30</sup>

### Numbers game

The CPB's founding conference played host to 150 delegates representing 1,591 members.<sup>31</sup> To put this into context, the CPGB had 10,350 registered members in 1987 and 7,615 in 1989.<sup>32</sup> As we have seen, leading CPB figures had exercised caution and recognised that it had not grouped together all those opposing the leadership. The CPB's opponents suggested that stronger areas for the breakaway organisation were in the old North West, East Midlands and West Middlesex sections of the CPGB, although in such areas the CPB still only had fractions of the official party's numerical support. London membership was estimated to be around 300, although this was heavily focused on Haringey, Hackney, Brent and Westminster.<sup>33</sup>

The CPB was not constructed on the basis of it becoming a ‘cadre’ party, where all those on its books were active and working under the discipline of a specific party unit. Unsurprisingly, the CPB was constructed on the same basis as the CPGB, where signing up and paying dues was the criterion of membership, rather than any particular level of participation. There were reports from the hostile Straight Left faction, for example, of the CPB signing up members door to door in the north-west of England from old CPGB membership lists.<sup>34</sup> This critical account surmised: ‘the CPB’s membership ... does not mark a qualitative change from the CPGB’s. The proportion of inactive members, card-carriers and non-dues payers will be just as large.’<sup>35</sup> This article estimated around 300–400 *active* members in sixty branches nationally.<sup>36</sup>

Looking further into the qualitative basis of the CPB membership, the rather anorexic reports that appeared in the *Morning Star* after the ‘re-establishment’ congress was announced in January cast further doubt on the idea that ‘the demand for re-establishing the party [was] welling up from the grass-roots’. On 2 February, it was reported that ‘CP district says: re-establish’, a reference to a discussion in the West Middlesex district of the CPGB, the substance of which was later disputed by opponents.<sup>37</sup> It was also reported that in Scotland ‘85 communists’ had elected three representatives to prepare the breakaway organisation.<sup>38</sup> A further report in February could only note that ‘representatives’ from the CPGB’s print, transport, London Transport, local government and pensioner advisories (i.e. not a majority of the organisations themselves) had decided to back the split.<sup>39</sup> On 24 March, it was reported that ‘Kent miners stand by Marxism-Leninism’, when a group around National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) activist Jack Dunn decided to join the breakaway.<sup>40</sup>

The implicit message behind these reports – working on the assumption that the *Morning Star* would want to highlight significant breaks from the CPGB – was that the CPB was to represent a spread of individuals and small knots of communists, a reflection perhaps of the CPGB’s dilapidated state at this time. Thus, when CPGB journal *7 Days* reported on the CPB’s foundation it was able to remark: ‘The congress leadership could only claim to have won the adherence of one of the CP’s industrial advisories (and that a district rather than a national one).’<sup>41</sup> However, there is an element of smoke and mirrors here: it is doubtful that many of these advisories worked in anything other than a loose, informal sense by 1988.<sup>42</sup> Other critics turned their attention to the composition of the breakaway’s new EC:

there are only three active industrial workers on the committee, despite all the claims to represent the party’s industrial base. Likewise, there is only one member of a trade union national leadership (Mike Hicks of SOGAT), although

this was an area the splitters claimed as their own. Even including one retired industrial worker and one unemployed AEU member, the working-class element on the EC is extremely slight, and less than that on the CPGB EC.<sup>43</sup>

*Communist* also drew attention to a lack of support in the NUM (outside the one-pit Kent coalfield), the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) and the Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section/Manufacturing, Science and Finance (TASS/MSF), with only the print unions and NALGO (National and Local Government Officers Association) providing partial reservoirs of support, with only one of the CPGB's few remaining workplace branches (Shardlows in Sheffield) supporting the split.<sup>44</sup>

Worse for the CPB, it had seemingly alienated some of the bigger trade union names on the *Morning Star* Management Committee and in the PPPS, i.e. on what should have been home turf. These included expelled CPGB members such as Ken Gill, General Secretary of TASS (later MSF) and TUC General Council member, and Terry Marsland of the Tobacco Workers' Union. Neither of these individuals joined the CPB and seemingly became opponents in the immediate aftermath of the breakaway. At the 1988 AGM of the PPPS, this meant that the Management Committee refused the offer of a joint list with members of the breakaway under the influence of CPB *refuseniks* such as Gill and Marsland. According to one eyewitness report of the London leg of the PPPS AGM: 'Terry Marsland stated that she and her Management Committee colleagues had not fought off the influence of one outside body [the CPGB] only to have it replaced by another [the CPB].'<sup>45</sup>

So, while the struggle around the *Morning Star* certainly represented an attempt on an immediate level by Tony Chater to reflect the ideology of what was left of the CPGB's trade union section this did not translate into direct support for the CPB; rather, during the break-up of the CPGB, those individuals and shallow networks we identified earlier became further dissipated between the CPB, groupings such as Communist Trade Unionists,<sup>46</sup> the Islip Unity Group (founded by Ramelson, Gill and ex-Labour Party General Secretary Jim Mortimer), the Communist Party of Scotland and others, and those who chose not to join any specific communist organisation. The *Morning Star* did receive more broad-based support as a newspaper. However, the CPB seemingly got the worst of both worlds from the way in which the struggle for control of the paper had played out. Those CPGB trade unionists (and those in the party bureaucracy who had worked closely with such comrades) who had a stronger degree of attachment to the priority of the party were likely to have been alienated by Chater's tactics in posing the novel idea of the paper's 'independence' (as reflected in the stance of veterans such as Ramelson); while those who were less attached and thought of themselves as trade unionists first and foremost were unlikely to have

seen the need for ‘outside bodies’ over and above the *Morning Star* itself (reflected in the stance of Marsland and those referred to by Rosser at the CPB’s founding congress).

### Post-natal depression

The CPB marked its first decade of existence in 1998 with the culmination of a bitter factional war in the shape of a strike by *Morning Star* workers in support of sacked editor John Haylett, who had been removed by PPPS chief executive Mary Rosser. Haylett was reinstated but the events were directly related to struggles inside the CPB. Rosser’s partner and political ally, Mike Hicks, CPB General Secretary since foundation, was removed from this position by the organisation’s EC in January 1998 and replaced by Robert Griffiths (by seventeen votes to thirteen). Supporters of the Hicks/Rosser faction, including Tony Chater, Ron and Joan Bellamy, and Peter Ritman (North West District Secretary), had been removed from the Executive and Political committees of the CPB during and after its 1995 congress. Rosser’s actions towards Haylett, a supporter of Griffiths, were therefore of a retaliatory nature.

Griffiths subsequently moved the explanation of this infighting onto a more individualised plane, stating that Hicks’s ‘style of work had become divisive and highly personalised, discrediting individuals and undermining collective leadership’ and that his predecessor as General Secretary had ‘allowed and even encouraged a dangerous polarisation to take place, based on the misrepresentation of comrades’ views – and in particular on the notion that an anti-*British Road to Socialism* faction was at work ... alongside a Straight Left faction’.<sup>47</sup> This obscures the deeper reasons behind the split, which undoubtedly went back to the CPB’s own fractured beginnings in the mid-1980s. Hicks and supporters such as Ron Bellamy may have exhibited a deeply paranoid cast but their suspicions did have a core of truth in that they reflected the deep divisions among CPGB oppositionists around the way forward as the host organisation disintegrated.

Before we move on to explore how such running sores worked themselves through the CPB, it is worthwhile remarking on the dissatisfaction inside the organisation in regards to a lack of dynamism and activity in its public work. We remarked above that the CPB was not founded as a cadre-type organisation, rather those who were counted as members only had to make minimal financial contributions. Opponents quickly remarked on its slow tempo of work<sup>48</sup> and the dominant narrative on the revolutionary left that the author became involved with in the early 1990s was that the CPB was a declining group of pensioners hiding behind the ‘broad’ trappings of the *Morning Star*. These undoubtedly harsh judgements were partially lodged

in reality. As the CPB's official history puts it: 'By the late 1990s, the party had ... rebuilt international links and recommenced electoral work. But the feeling was growing [presumably among the group set to elect Griffiths] that the party should be more vigorous in asserting its independent identity and role, alongside its work in broader alliances.'<sup>49</sup> Although we can reject the somewhat overblown claims of figures such as Ron Bellamy that such cautious criticism of the Hicks regime reflected a new 'sectarian' mentality in the CPB,<sup>50</sup> there can be no doubt that even the tentative stress on independent identity by Griffiths and company was a blow against the 1988 dénouement. In its dotage, the CPGB was awash with the idea that the face of the party should remain hidden by the 'broader' identities of, for example, trade unionism, peace campaigners or the women's movement. This would have been ABC for parts of the CPB's membership but it had dragged in its wake more dynamic elements such as the South Wales group around Griffiths. While such groups had dropped their more full-blooded revolutionary rhetoric and swallowed a version of the *BRS*, there was clearly still a measure of impatience in the manner in which it assessed the CPB's progress, or lack of it.

#### 'Communist unity'

The CPB continued its relationship with those ex-CPGB oppositional elements that had refused to enter the breakaway organisation in 1988. According to Stevenson:

During 1994, a small group of influential people associated with the anti-revisionist camp [that] had stayed inside the CPGB until the end publicly proposed a meeting with the CPB Political Committee to consider moving the process of communist unity forward. Despite some attempts to prevent this by Mike Hicks the meeting did go ahead and eventually resulted in an invitation to all individuals associated with the call to join by applying to their local [CPB] branch.<sup>51</sup>

This group included activists such as Andrew Murray<sup>52</sup> and Nick Wright, who had been involved with the Straight Left faction inside the CPGB. They had formed the Communist Liaison group after splitting from Straight Left in 1992, publishing *Diamat*.<sup>53</sup> The tendency dissolved itself into the CPB in 1995. Others involved in the unity process included Gill and other trade union elements that had stayed aloof from the breakaway in 1988.

Hicks's hostility to this new group was immediately apparent. He said: 'We opened our doors to people who had venomously attacked us in the past. They have now said they accept the programme and rules of our party and we trust this turns out to be true.'<sup>54</sup> This sense of mistrust emanates

from the interaction of the Straight Left group and the CCG inside the CPGB in the 1980s.

We have already drawn upon some of the hostile reports that emanated from the Straight Left group around the time of the CPB's formation. The detailed breakdowns of the relatively paltry numbers joining the new organisation were inspired by Straight Left's overall view, in common with other oppositions, that the CPB was a low-level split from the CPGB and not something to be encouraged. In the words of an article from Straight Left's *Communist* journal in 1988:

If there is any *political* line [that] separates the splitters [the CCG] from the non-splitters on any major political question, we have yet to hear of it. So the proposed splits in the party will not result in one united Marxist-Leninist party; if they happen, they will result in the hiving off from one existing party of a number of groups [that] will repeat on an even [smaller] scale, the problems of the [CPGB] now. Disruption and nothing else.<sup>55</sup>

For its part, the CCG denounced the Straight Left faction, partly on the grounds of the pretence, sketched out above, that the CCG was not itself a faction:

The Communist Campaign Group is *not* open to support from any organised faction either outside the [CPGB] or inside the [CPGB]. As regards the latter, we refer specifically to the Straight Left faction. The individuals grouped around Straight Left have their own newspaper, their own organisation, and their own objectives. Hiding behind a camouflage of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, their left sectarian actions in effect aid and abet the Eurocommunist plan of liquidating the Communist Party.<sup>56</sup>

Another CCG criticism of Straight Left was in relation to its 'heads-down' approach to work inside the CPGB. In the words of the CCG such an approach:

counsels caution and compliance with the authority of the [CPGB's] Executive Committee. It says that if there is disagreement and dissatisfaction with the Eurocommunists [the faction then dominating the party's leadership], then opposition must be expressed and conducted via the normal party channels. That is to say, we must try at successive congresses to defeat and remove the Eurocommunists.<sup>57</sup>

This led to notorious moves such as Straight Leftists walking out with the CPGB leader Gordon McLennan when he closed down a London District Congress in November 1984 that threatened to become a point of opposition to the party leadership.<sup>58</sup> Mike Hicks, in the chair of this meeting, and expelled from the CPGB shortly afterwards, later contemptuously observed that Straight Left 'ended up selling *Marxism Today* instead of the *Morning Star* and justified it because the executive told them to'.<sup>59</sup>

The hostility that Hicks and company felt towards the unity process was thus partly a reflection of a deep factional enmity embedded in the struggles of the past, amplified by an essentially hierarchical and Stalinised model of party-building that offered little encouragement for the coming together of more disparate groups of communists in ideologically broad formations. As Chater told the CPB's founding congress in 1988: 'Factions and factional-type activity have no place in a communist party.'<sup>60</sup>

### **Down the Road**

Another contributory factor to the hostility of Hicks's faction was almost certainly around the process of 'communist unity' bringing into the CPB members of a more leftist disposition who disagreed with its programmatic foundation. By and large, the CPB had been won to the idea expressed by the leading group in the CCG that the breakaway should base itself on an updated version of the CPGB's *BRS* programme. The CPB's 1989 congress therefore adopted such a document, which firmly upheld the traditional CPGB perspective of a parliamentary road to socialism, backed by the mass of the labour movement. It said:

In the present conditions of Britain ... implementation [of an Alternative Economic and Political Strategy – AEPS] can only begin to come about with the election of a Labour government. However it cannot be a Labour government of the usual right-wing reformist type that we have seen in the past, which, although it can be compelled to carry through a few progressive measures, is basically committed to managing and protecting the capitalist system. On the contrary, it must be a Labour government of a completely new type, a government [that] can come about through the wide-ranging struggles of a mass movement demanding the type of policies contained within the AEPS.<sup>61</sup>

There was some minority opposition at the 1989 congress from figures such as ex-Straight Leftist and CPB EC member Mary Davis, who stated that she did not fully support the *BRS*, 'especially the formulation on state power', and from Chris Ward (Govan) who argued that the working class 'cannot simply take over the state', moving a defeated amendment on the issue.<sup>62</sup> These stances taken at the 1989 congress were indicative of a number of critical documents in the pre-congress discussion that broadly attacked the CPB's draft from the left. Some of these could be seen as reanimations of the critique that the CPGB's old left opposition had made of the *BRS* in 1977.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, Bernard Harper, talking positively of the CPGB's 'class-against-class' strategy of 1929, said: 'Lenin's support for CP affiliation to the Labour Party as a tactic may or may not have been correct in 1920. But to repeat the suggestion 70 years later, ignoring the class treachery of every



Labour government and every Labour leadership, is pure dogmatism.<sup>64</sup> Eileen Chaney stated: 'Many comrades regard the [AEPS] with suspicion, believing it to be an attempt to make capitalism work, rather than as a move towards socialism.'<sup>65</sup> Cyril Granger of Mid-Anglia CPB branch complained: 'At our last branch meeting we were faced with a *fait accompli* – we could only amend the *BRS*, not reject it as I should have liked.'<sup>66</sup>

Although the 1989 congress rejected the views of this minority it is interesting that, as mentioned above, it did also vote for unity talks with organisations such as the NCP, against the advice of the CPB leadership. The NCP, formally at least, rejected the whole idea of the *BRS* as 'revisionist'.<sup>67</sup> Leftist members of the CPB EC, such as Davis, however, spoke up for the idea of 'communist unity'.<sup>68</sup> Already, we have a sign of the leading figures of the CPB being worried at 'alien' ideological interference from a broader-based organisation, while those of a relatively left-wing persuasion welcomed it. These stances obviously carried over into the period of the mid-1990s when the Communist Liaison group dissolved itself into the CPB.

The Straight Left faction, despite its adoption of leftist poses and language (at least in publications aimed at the inner-party struggle in the CPGB; such stances were softened for the 'broad' *Straight Left* newspaper), seemed to share a lot of the ambiguity towards the *BRS* that was shown by the broader left opposition of the CPGB in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>69</sup> On the one hand, such groupings seemed disturbed at the gradualism inherent in the programme; on the other, there was the knowledge that the whole idea of 'national roads to socialism' was bound up with the ideology of the Soviet Union's leadership in the post-war period and that Stalin had supervised the original *BRS*. This proved to be a bind on those elements in the CPGB that were still pulled to revolutionary ideas. Critiques of the 'reformist' *BRS* were usually tied to ideas of the revolutionary probity of Stalin, the Soviet Union and other countries in the 'socialist' bloc.

The Communist Liaison group, however, stripped away some of Straight Left's ambiguity on the issue of the *BRS*. In an analysis of the CPGB's first two decades, Murray argued that, after 1941: 'A transformation of the CPGB was set in hand [that] ended, in a fairly short period, in its development as a reformist party.' Embellishing the argument, he added:

the retreat from factory-based organisation, the growing view that the road to socialism lay through parliament, the illusion that the new world balance of forces made peaceful change possible, the increasing emphasis on electoral work, the tendency to separate off trade union from political activity, the growth of a party bureaucracy, the drift to narrowly 'British' perspectives and eventually estrangement from the world communist movement – all these became more and more the dominant trends in the party's direction from the period of alliance between British imperialism and Soviet socialism onwards.<sup>70</sup>



Timing is everything in politics, so the saying goes. Communist Liaison published this pamphlet in 1995, in the middle of the communist unity process with the CPB, so it's difficult not to see it as anything other than a contribution to that undertaking. Murray's logic, as he was no doubt aware at the time, would have been grossly offensive to the leading group around Hicks, Chater, Rosser and Ron Bellamy – Communist Liaison apparently contemptuously referred to this group as the 'gang of four' – which had established the CPB precisely on the basis of the developments that Murray had critiqued. As Ron Bellamy bitterly noted a few years later: 'The responsibility for political education in the biggest [CPB] district (London) has been given to Andrew Murray, author of an unrepudiated 1995 history of the Communist Party in Britain [that] characterises it as reformist after 1941. This includes the whole epoch of the *British Road to Socialism*.'<sup>71</sup>

Griffiths, who became CPB General Secretary in 1998 as the group around Hicks was defeated, had no such problem with the Communist Liaison group, however leftist its orientation. This was not because the process of 'communist unity' of the mid-1990s presaged a move towards revolutionary socialism. (There is no evidence for this and an updated version of the *BRS*, with its traditional emphases intact, was adopted in 2001, renamed as *Britain's Road to Socialism*.) Rather, Griffiths may well have felt that different ideological strains could be contained inside the CPB, given that he himself had once been an ardent critic of the *BRS* as a CPGB member in the mid-1980s. Indeed, a dominant trend in relation to the *BRS* inside both the CPGB and the CPB breakaway has been that of adaptation and grudging acceptance of its parameters from those to its left. This is particularly prevalent among those, such as Griffiths, who defend, in one form or another, the trajectory of the Soviet Union after the Second World War.<sup>72</sup> Hanging on to, say, an admiration of Stalin alongside a revolutionary critique of the *BRS* was and is a very tricky tightrope to negotiate.<sup>73</sup>

### Aftermath

As stated above, in the years following this factional infighting, *BRS*-type notions dominated the programmatic discourse of the CPB. The ascendancy of Blairism obviously posed some tricky questions as to the possibility of the Labour Party being any kind of vehicle for socialism and Griffiths himself fronted moves to engage with George Galloway's Respect project (defeated by a 60/40 margin at a special congress in January 2004) and, more latterly, to establish a new, mass party of labour based on the trade unions to replace the Labour Party. However, Jeremy Corbyn's victory as Labour leader in 2015 means that these previous debates are now null and void, given the

possibility of Corbyn establishing a left-Labour government of a ‘completely new type’ in the lexicon of the CPB.

What role the CPB will play in future political developments in the British labour movement is a moot point. It has at least maintained the *Morning Star* but the CPB’s membership has shrunk to 917,<sup>74</sup> although some care needs to be exercised here. The organisation is not of a cadre type, so shrinkage in the membership (i.e. those prepared to pay dues) could conceal a more active membership. However, in 2006, CPB members were making the same kind of complaints that had been levied at the regime of Mike Hicks (and, before that, in the CPGB in the 1960s and 1970s). In 2006, the CPB noted:

We recognise that many comrades in the party are playing a vital role in the broader labour movement, peace, solidarity, pensioners’ and anti-racist organisations, etc. Many therefore find it difficult to play a role directly in party activities. However, this means that, with a small party membership, our resources are overstretched most of the time. We have reached a critical point in our party’s development and if the problem is left unresolved, then we may see a decline in our work.<sup>75</sup>

However, such concerns gloss over the ideological circumstances of the CPB’s foundation. The lesson from the last century or so is that ‘Leninist’ organisations that formally prohibit factional activity in favour of privileged internal groups and ideas are usually unable to develop into genuine broad-based party formations, and thus oscillate between ‘broad’ diplomatic fronts and internal regimes that are prone to splits. This is the essential dynamic of the CPB and the *Morning Star*. The organisation’s inability to break with the sterile practice of the old CPGB is thus a critical flaw in its political make-up.

### Notes

- 1 For example, W. Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920–91* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), pp. 183–97.
- 2 *The Crisis in the Communist Party and the Way Forward* (London: Communist Campaign Group, no date but circa 1985), p. 10, emphasis in original.
- 3 For more on this history, see L. Parker, *The Kick Inside: Revolutionary Opposition in the CPGB, 1945–1991* (London: November Publications, 2012), pp. 75–95; and L. Parker, ‘Opposition in Slow Motion: The CPGB’s Anti-Revisionists in the 1960s and 1970s’, in E. Smith and M. Worley (eds), *Against the Grain: The British Far Left from 1956* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), pp. 98–107.
- 4 Costello did not join the CPB on its formation in 1988 and, according to Francis Beckett, had fallen out with Chater over an unpublished article on *perestroika*

in the Soviet Union – F. Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London: Merlin Press, 1998), p. 228. Costello did eventually join the CPB in circa 2007.

- 5 T. Lane, 'The Unions: Caught on the Ebb Tide', *Marxism Today*, September 1982.
- 6 *Morning Star*, 26 August 1982.
- 7 In writing this, I am following observations from Douglas Hyde (a news editor on the *Daily Worker*) as to the clearly subordinate (i.e. subordinate to the CPGB) role and function of the PPPS around the time of the Second World War. D. Hyde, *I Believed: The Autobiography of a Former British Communist* (London: William Heinemann, 1951), pp. 191–2.
- 8 *Morning Star*, 1 June 1983.
- 9 In 1985 the CCG listed only five broad regional groups, London and the South East; the Midlands; the North West; Scotland; and South Wales – *The Crisis in the Communist Party and the Way Forward*, p. 13.
- 10 F. Grafton, 'The Crisis of the *Morning Star* and the Communist Party', *The Leninist*, August 1983.
- 11 R. Seifert and T. Sibley, *Revolutionary Communist at Work: A Political Biography of Bert Ramelson* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2012), p. 278. Seifert and Sibley also show that Ramelson was opposed to the CPB split when it occurred in 1988 – see p. 296 and p. 350.
- 12 J. McIlroy, 'Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics', in J. McIlroy, N. Fishman and A. Campbell (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964–79* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1999), pp. 216–58, p. 222.
- 13 G. Andrews, *Endgames and New Times: The Final Years of British Communism 1964–1991* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2004), p. 190.
- 14 *The Crisis in the Communist Party and the Way Forward*, p. 10.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 16 M. Martin, *Pre-Congress Discussion 1* (Communist Party of Britain, no date but circa 1989).
- 17 'South Wales Discussion Papers', *The Leninist*, 20 March 1987. Griffiths was almost certainly the main author of these documents. He was the animator of the Cardiff Marxist Forum, and joined the CPGB after membership of the militant Welsh Socialist Republican Movement.
- 18 S. Castor, '"Re-establishment Congress" Launches Communist Party of Britain', *Frontline*, 10 October 1988.
- 19 Thompson, *The Good Old Cause*, p. 185.
- 20 For more on this, see E. Smith, 'Did 1989 Matter? British Marxists and the Collapse of the Eastern Bloc', in E. Polonska-Kimunguyi and P. Kimunguyi (eds), *Transitions Revisited: Central and Eastern Europe Twenty Years After the Soviet Union* (Warsaw: Scholar Publishing House, 2012), pp. 159–64.
- 21 *After the 40th Congress: Which Way for the Communist Party?* (Communist Campaign Group, no date but circa January 1988).
- 22 *Morning Star*, 9 January 1988.

- 23 Press Statement, Communist Campaign Group, 8 January 1988.
- 24 *Morning Star*, 25 April 1988.
- 25 Cited in N. Temple, 'Party of Pretence', *7 Days*, 30 April 1988.
- 26 *Morning Star*, 25 April 1988.
- 27 Cited in *The New Worker*, 29 April 1988.
- 28 S. Kelsey, 'Three Doorways to Liquidation', *The Leninist*, 23 December 1989.
- 29 For a highly partisan report of this gathering, see M. Waters, 'Shotgun Wedding?', *The Leninist*, 30 January 1991.
- 30 *70 Years of Struggle: Britain's Communist Party, 1920–1990* (London: Communist Party of Britain, 1990), emphasis added.
- 31 *Morning Star*, 25 April 1988.
- 32 Thompson, *The Good Old Cause*, p. 218.
- 33 'The Breakaway – An Assessment', *Communist*, May 1988.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 *Morning Star*, 2 February 1988. An alternative report suggested that the West Middlesex district committee voted by nine votes to two to reject a split from the CPGB, although this source did state that this was one of the 'worst affected' areas in terms of support for the CPB breakaway – see 'The Breakaway – An Assessment'.
- 38 *Morning Star*, 2 February 1988.
- 39 Ibid., 11 February 1988.
- 40 Ibid., 24 March 1988.
- 41 Temple, 'Party of Pretence'.
- 42 Stevenson remarks that by 1989, CPGB members in the TGWU had had 'little contact' with the party centre for 'some years' – G. Stevenson, *The British Communist Party in the 1980s: Revisionism, Resistance and Re-establishment*, [www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=700&Itemid=56](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=700&Itemid=56) (accessed 10 July 2014).
- 43 'The Breakaway – An Assessment'. Hicks was a London print worker who had been jailed in 1986 for his involvement in the Wapping dispute.
- 44 'Myths About the Split', *Communist*, April 1988.
- 45 Cited in *The Leninist – Notes of the Week*, 19 June 1988. For a report that broadly concurs with this account, see 'The PPPS AGM', *Communist*, June 1988.
- 46 According to Stevenson, this group was 'a loose national organisation that sought to bring together former members of the [CPGB] who were active in trade union work', although this did apparently involve some CPB members, as well as those in other organisations – Stevenson, *The British Communist Party in the 1980s*.
- 47 Cited in Beckett, *Enemy Within*, p. 236.
- 48 For an example see A. Long, 'Shape of Things to Come', *The Leninist*, 23 May 1988.
- 49 R. Griffiths and B. Stevenson, *The Communist Party 1920–2010: 90 Years of Struggle for the Working Class and Humanity* (London: Communist Party of Britain, 2010), p. 42.

- 50 ‘“Official communist” opposition’, *Weekly Worker*, 11 October 2000. This article reproduces a document from the *Marxist Forum* journal, set up by Hicks, Rosser, Ron and Joan Bellamy, and Peter Ritman after their exit from the CPB.
- 51 Stevenson, *The British Communist Party in the 1980s*.
- 52 Murray eventually became chief of staff at the Unite trade union and chair of the Stop the War coalition. He has been an intermittent member of the CPB’s EC.
- 53 For a hostile report on Communist Liaison’s foundation, see ‘NCP ... CPB ... and Now CLG ... British Communism’s Latest Splinter Group’, *Communist*, August 1992.
- 54 Beckett, *Enemy Within*, p. 234.
- 55 ‘Communist Party – Breakaway: Irrelevant and Disruptive’, *Communist*, January 1988, emphasis in original.
- 56 *The Crisis in the Communist Party and the Way Forward*, p. 10, emphasis in original.
- 57 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
- 58 For a report of this meeting, see ‘London District Congress: A Rising Tide of Revolt’, *The Leninist*, January 1985.
- 59 Beckett, *Enemy Within*, p. 234.
- 60 *Morning Star*, 25 April 1988.
- 61 Communist Party of Britain, *The British Road to Socialism* (London: CPB, 1989).
- 62 Kelsey, ‘Three Doorways to Liquidation’.
- 63 For more on this opposition, see Parker, *The Kick Inside*, pp. 75–95.
- 64 B. Harper, *Pre-Congress Discussion 2* (Communist Party of Britain, no date but circa 1989), p. 11.
- 65 E. Chaney, *Pre-Congress Discussion 1*, p. 7.
- 66 C. Granger, *Pre-Congress Discussion 2*, p. 8.
- 67 For more on the NCP and the BRS, see Parker, *The Kick Inside*, pp. 89–90.
- 68 Kelsey, ‘Three Doorways to Liquidation’.
- 69 For example, in relation to the 1977 draft of the BRS, then under discussion in the CPGB, Fergus Nicholson, set to become one of the Straight Left faction’s leading members, in the context of arguing against ‘a gradual evolution from monopoly capitalism to socialism’ that would ‘disarm the working class’, said: ‘Of course, 25,000 words can’t all be wrong, and there are many separate statements in the draft that we have made before and which no one will quarrel with’, *Comment*, 1 October 1977.
- 70 A. Murray, *The Communist Party of Great Britain: A Historical Analysis to 1941* (Liverpool: Communist Liaison, 1995), p. 5.
- 71 ‘“Official communist” opposition’.
- 72 At the CPB’s 2008 congress, Griffiths said: ‘In the post-war world, as the Labour government aligned Britain with US imperialism, NATO and the Cold War, our party drew up its new programme *The British Road to Socialism*, endorsed at the 22nd congress in 1952. Today, we know much more about the role of Stalin in proposing some of its contents. This is not an embarrassment for us ...’.

Cited in L. Parker, 'Dead Russians and a Welshman', *Weekly Worker*, 13 November 2008.

- 73 Such contradictions were enough to wreck CPGB opposition factions such as the Appeal Group in the 1970s. See Parker, *The Kick Inside*, pp. 77–80.
- 74 'Statement of Accounts: Communist Party of Britain', 15 April 2015, <http://search.electoralcommission.org.uk/Api/Accounts/Documents/16156> (accessed 14 March 2016).
- 75 Communist Party of Britain, *Report of the 49th Congress* (London: CPB, 2006). The CPB numbers its congresses so as to suggest a continuation with the CPGB.

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